NEED FOR A
NEW RELIGION IN INDIA
& OTHER ESSAYS

Khushwant Singh

Need for a New Religion in India & Other Essays

Reference Book

Edited & Compiled by

ROHINI SINGH

Gandhi Memorial College
SRINAGAR
Acc. No: 1153 22(IV)
Dated: 1993

200
Si64N

G.M.C.E.J
1153

UBSPD
UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd.
New Delhi • Bombay • Bangalore • Madras
Calcutta • Patna • Kanpur • London

UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd.
5 Ansari Road, New Delhi-110 002
Bombay Bangalore Madras
Calcutta Patna Kanpur London

© Text : Khushwant Singh 1991
Selection & arrangement : Rohini Singh 1991

[illegible]

First Published 1991

ISBN 81-85273-65-0

Laser typeset at Mac Printec, Darya Ganj, New Delhi, 110 002 and printed at Surya Print Process, 9/54 Kirti Nagar Industrial Area, New Delhi-110 015

For
Syeda Saiyidain Hameed

Editor's Note

As I sit down to write this note today, there is very little I can say about Khushwant Singh that the present-day reader doesn't know already. Apart from being the most prolific, Khushwant Singh is also the most written and talked about author and columnist today. Till very recently, he wrote a weekly column syndicated by over 50 journals in all the regional languages of the country. In 1990, six of his books were published, including his *magnum opus, Delhi*, which has registered a record sale. The present generation of readers certainly needs no introduction to him.

This collection of essays, however, is intended as much for the future generations as it is for the present. Let me therefore address myself to our 'children's children' who might not know Khushwant Singh as 'intimately' as those who live in his times.

Khushwant Singh was a totally self-made man, the only 'literate' in his family as he often jokingly remarked. Born in Hadali, in Pakistan, on an unrecorded date, he grew up in a typical Punjabi, God-fearing family. He did not show any special inclination towards writing in his early years. Infact, he was an academic failure. He dreaded school, often bunked it and barely managed to scrape through his yearly exams. His record remained much the same at St. Stephen's College and Government College, Lahore except that, at the latter, at the annual college debate, "instead of being hooted, as most speakers were, he was heard with rapt attention, his jokes evoked a lot of laughter and he got away with the first prize, the only one he ever won in any university." He passed his B.A. in the third division and decided to qualify for the bar at King's College, London, which, in those days, "required no more than dining at the

Inns of Court for three years and paying a fee which gave you a licence to practise law in any court." He got it but unfortunately, no clientele to go with it. He returned to India and married but his practice never picked up. In 1947, when India and Pakistan were partitioned, he left Lahore, never to return to live in his ancestral house nor to ever practise law again. Back at Delhi, he joined the Foreign Service. He stuck with it for a few years before he turned to full-time writing.

Khushwant maintained that his earliest foray into the world of fiction was bragging, when he came home for vacations from England, of his exploits with English girls. His first works appeared in print, however, in the *Canadian Forum, Saturday Night* and *Harpers*. Soon after, his first collection of short stories *The Mark of Vishnu* was published by Saturn Press. Later, he translated the *Japji*, the Sikh's Morning Prayer for Probsthain and also wrote a short history of the Sikhs for Allen and Unwin. This later earned him an offer from the Rockefeller Foundation to do a more definitive work on the same theme which established him as an authority on the subject. His lectures on Comparative Religions delivered at Swarthmore and Princeton Universities were published under the title *Vision of India*, though his most memorable work was undoubtedly *Train to Pakistan*. It was at Swarthmore that he was offered the editorship of the magazine, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, an assignment that made him the most talked-about editor in the country, that took his writings into thousands of Indian homes and raised the circulation of the magazine from 40,000 to 410,000. He was honoured with the Padma Bhushan. Though he was finally asked to quit when the government of the day changed, he had by then become something of a cult figure and was flooded with offers. He edited the *National Herald*, the *New Delhi* magazine and finally, *The Hindustan Times*, then one of north India's largest selling dailies. In 1980 he became an M.P. He was the Consulting Editor of Penguin India and wrote his immensely popular column which he finally gave up in order to devote himself to finishing his Autobiography and working on other serious writing, worthy of preservation for readers of your generation.

A few words about this collection: Khushwant Singh was always a voracious reader. There is a series of knowledgeable articles in this book in which he talks about the lives and works of some of the most memorable authors of our times: Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Oscar Wilde, Dylan Thomas etc. He sketches their loves, hates, quirks and foibles in his inimitable, immensely readable style. There are a number of other articles on varied themes: the Monsoon, Love and Lust in Literature, Ghosts and Talking to the Dead. Of utmost relevance and interest, however, is the title essay in which Khushwant presents a blue-print for a new religion for India. It is his personal creed, shorn of unnecessary rituals, barriers of caste, a plethora of Gods and places of worship. It is simple, practical and environmentally aware, based as it is on tolerance and consideration for others. It is certainly the need of the communally riot-torn India of today. How I wish I could predict that it will become the most widely-adopted religion of this land; the one into which you, the future generation, will be born.

February 1, 1991 **ROHINI SINGH**

Contents

1. Need for a New Religion in India 1
2. Quran for the Non-Muslims 18
3. The Language of Love and Lust 30
4. The Monsoon in Literature 48
5. Life, and Other Laughing Matters 60
6. Of Life Hereafter, Ghosts and Talking to the Dead 71
7. Scholar Extraordinary: Nirad C. Chaudhuri 81
8. Prophet Manque: Aldous Huxley 95
9. Belloc : Bigot and Gentleman 115
10. Oscar Wilde's World of Pleasure and Pain 123
11. Ungentle into the Good Night: Dylan Thomas 132
12. Evelyn Waugh Revisited 145

One

Need for A New Religion in India

Bernard Shaw wrote that every intelligent man makes his own religion though there are a hundred versions of it. Evolving a personal religion for myself has been a life-long quest. It has been as Allama Iqbal put it —

> *Dhoondta phirta hoon main, ai Iqbal, apney aap ko*
> *Aap hee goya musaafir, aap hee manzil hoon main.*

> O Iqbal, I go about everywhere looking for myself
> As if I were the wayfarer as well as the destination.

I was born a Sikh and reared in Sikhism. My parents were orthodox Sikhs who observed traditions of the *Khalsa Panth* (unshorn hair and beards for men and carrying other emblems of the militant fraternity). Many religious rituals were observed in our home. A prayer room was set apart for the *Granth Sahib*. One or other member of the family had to install it on its pedestal in the early hours of the morning and put it back to rest in a cupboard in the evening; everyone was expected to say his morning prayer (*Japji*) and read a hymn or two from the scripture before he or she came to the breakfast table. The evening prayer (*Rehras*) was a joint affair. We took turns in reciting it while others listened. Most of us also recited the last prayer of the day (*Keertan Sohila*) before switching off the lights. My grandmother, with whom I shared a room till I was 18, spent the best part of the day mumbling prayers. There were frequent *Akhand Paaths* (non-stop readings of the *Granth Sahib* from cover to cover by a relay of *paathees*, which takes two days and nights). Occasionally there was also a *Sampat Paath* in which a favourite hymn had to be recited after every one of the 5000 hymns of the Granth; this could take upwards of a fortnight. All these *paaths* (at which attendance was *de rigueur)* were accompanied by *keertans* sung by professional *raagis*. On the birth anniversaries of the first guru, Nanak, and the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, as well as the martyrdom anniversaries of the fifth guru, Arjun Dev, and the ninth guru, Tegh Bahadur, we joined processions taken out through the streets and worshipped in public *gurudwaras*. As a child of five I was initiated into reading the scripture and at seventeen I underwent a baptismal ceremony (*amrit chakna* – sipping of ambrosial water) which symbolised that I had joined the Khalsa fraternity. While in college, I began to question the value of these rituals and the need to conform to Khalsa traditions. However, I decided to go along with them rather than create trouble for myself. I took pains to understand the prayers I had been reciting. Good *keertan* continued, as it does to this day, to touch my emotional chords. Meanwhile, at St. Stephen's College I attended Bible classes. Although the emphasis was on the *New Testament* and the life of Jesus Christ, it was the language of the *Old Testament*, particularly the *Psalms*, the *Song of Solomon* and the *Book of Job* that I found myself drawn to. Later, while working on the translations of the Sikh Scriptures, I found so many references to the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and the epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* includ1ing the *Geeta*, that I decided to study them to better comprehend the meaning of my own *Gurubaani*. Interest in religion also made me read whatever I could on Jainism, Buddhism and later developments in Hinduism. Islam was the last religion I turned to, largely to free myself of anti-Muslim prejudices which had been instilled into me as a child.

By the time I was 40, no religion evoked much enthusiasm in my mind. I was invited by the Spalding Foundation to deliver three lectures on Sikhism at Oxford University. Following the publication of my two volumes on Sikh religion and history by Princeton and Oxford University Presses, I was invited to lecture on comparative religions by Princeton, Swarthmore and Hawaii Universities. Once again I went over the scriptures and lives of the founders of the worlds' major religions. Having done all this writing and lecturing, I feel mentally well equipped to express myself on religious beliefs and practices. And I feel more strongly than ever before the need to have not only a personal religion of my own but to evolve a new set of beliefs for Indians who have the courage to think for themselves. It is based on the assumptions that most people need some kind of faith to live with; that the emotional contents of that faith are best provided by the one into which one is born and whose rituals have formed an integral part of his or her upbringing. What I feel is required today is the acceptance of what is basic and rational in the religion of ones birth after removing from it the accretions of dead wood that have accumulated around it and militate against reason and common sense. I present this, the blueprint of my religion, for consideration and comment to my more enlightened countrymen.

Before I do so, I will first deal with five items which are generally regarded as the pillars of all religions: belief in God; reverence for the founders of religions; the status of Scriptures; the sanctity accorded to places of worship and pilgrimage; and the use of prayer and ritual. Since most of what I have to say on these topics may appear critical and negative, I will thereafter posit items for positive acceptance.

1. CONCEPT OF GOD

Every religion has its own name and concept of God. He is Jehovah, Ishwar, Parmatama, Rabb, Khuda, Allah and Wahguru. He may be symbolised in the shape of idols, animals or other natural phenomenon, or he may be regarded beyond physical representation in any form. He may be believed to be the only one, a trinity or a multiplicity of Gods. However different the ways of conceiving Him, what all religions have in common are the powers they attribute to Him. He is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer; He is Omniscent (all-knowing), Omnipotent (all-powerful) and Omnipresent; He is just, benign and merciful to the faithful and at the same time an angry God who metes out dire punishment to transgressors. Whatever He be, we have to ponder over questions posed by Adi Shankara over a thousand years ago and find answers to them. If there are none, then we have to admit that we have got the God business all wrong.

Kustwam? Ko Ham? Kutah ayatah?
Ko mein janani? Ko mein taatah?

Who am I? Where did I come from and how?
Who are my real father and mother who gave me birth?

Different religions have given different answers to these questions. These can be grouped into two categories: those given by the Judaic family of religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam and those given by the Hindic family of religions—Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. The Judaic group maintains that God created the world, sent out Adam and Eve to propagate the human race and created all other forms of life. According to it, one day, all life on earth will end and there will be a Day of Judgement when people will rise from their graves to be judged for the good or evil they did in life and accordingly be sent to heaven or hell. The Judeo-Christian-Muslim view of life is linear: it has a beginning, a middle and an end. The Hindic view of life is cyclical: there is no beginning and no end but a continuing, unending cycle of births, deaths and re-births. There is no heaven or hell (although it has names like *Swarga* for paradise and *Nark* for hell) but would have you believe that reward for good deeds and punishment for evil acts is meted out in the form in which a person will be re-born. Its real equivalent to heaven is release from *Samsar* and Union (*Yoga*) with the Infinite that is God. It is *Moksha* (salvation). For the evil it will be a purgatory of re-birth in all the 84 lakh forms of life (*Joon*) before release will be granted.

However more sophisticated the Hindic theory of *Samsar* may appear in comparison to the simplistic Judaic version, there is as little evidence to prove its validity as there is about Adam, Eve and the Day of Judgement. The honest truth is that we do not know where we come from, whether or not there is a divine purpose in our existence on earth nor do we know where we will go when we die. The stark truth of our ignorance is summed up in a couplet by Shah Azimabadi:

Sunee hikayat-e-hastee to darmiyaan say sunee
Na ibtida kee khabar hai, na intihaa maaloom

What we have heard of the story of life is its middle
We know not how it began, we know not how it will end.

Under the circumstances, the only honest answer an intelligent person can give to the question "Is there a God?" is to reply "I do not know".

It may be recalled that Gautama Buddha was put the same question, not once but several times by his chief disciple and cousin, Ananda. The Enlightened One did not deign to reply. The only conclusion we can draw from his silence is that he either wanted people to find out the answer for themselves or it must be taken as an admission that he did not know it himself.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, in his scholarly commentary on the *Surat-ul-Fatiha* in the first of his three volume translation and commentary of the *Quran, Tarjuman-ul-Quran*, maintains that all mankind were, at one time, monotheists but with the eruption of different religious systems, departed from the concept of one Almighty God. He further maintains that the Islamic idea of the unity of Allah was the most advanced because it refused to give God shape or form and went beyond the Upanishadic definition in negatives *neti, neti* (not this, not this) but gave God positive attributes by calling him the Great Provider (*Al-Razzaq*), Ruler of the Universe (*Rabb-ul-Aalameen*), Merciful and Just (*Al-Rahman, al Raheem*) and the final arbiter of human actions (*Malik-i-Yawmiddeen* – Master of the Day of Reckoning).

The Maulana also quoted the *Quran* in support of all creation being attributed to God. His argument was much the same as Voltaire's: "We can scarcely believe that there can be a watch without a watch maker". What neither Voltaire nor the Maulana—nor for that matter anyone else who believes that every effect must have a cause—have been able to substantiate is that if God is the cause and the world the effect, who created God in the first place? It is the primary cause, *the causa causans*, about which we know nothing.

Instead of entering into a pointless debate on whether or not God exists, it is more important to bear in mind that belief in the existence of God has little bearing on making a person a good or a bad citizen. One can be a saintly person without believing in God, and a detestable villain believing in Him. In my personalised religion, God has no place.

2. FOUNDERS OF RELIGIONS

In every religion, the founder is more revered than God. This can be ascribed to the simple reason that we know more about the founders of our faiths, be they described as Prophets, Messiahs, Messengers, *Avtaars* or Gurus, than we know about God. They were human beings gifted with superhuman powers which enabled them to sway the masses. With the passage of years, so many legends grew around them that they ceased to be human and became incarnations of God, His progeny, His specially chosen messengers with direct access to Him. The classic instance of giving the Messenger a higher status than God Himself is found in present day Islam. You may make jokes about Allah but woe betide anyone who makes the slightest insinuation against His Messenger, the Prophet Mohammed: *Ba-khudaa diwaanaa Basho, ba Mohammed hoshiaar*! Say what you like about God, but against Mohammed, beware! This attitude explains the fate of Salman Rushdie for having written *The Satanic Verses*, the rumpus created against the U.S. Ambassador, Professor J K Galbraith when it got known that he had given his pet cat one of the names by which Prophet Mohammed was known, Ahmed; and the burning down of the offices of *The Deccan Herald* in Bangalore because it had published a short story entitled "Mohammed the Idiot". The story had nothing whatsoever to do with the Prophet but was about a demented man bearing the same name.

The truth of the matter is that we have hardly any reliable historical evidence on what the founders of different religions were really like. By deifying them we have done them grave injustice. We have made them incomparably good and beyond human striving. In my personalised religion, I would give Prophets, Avtaars and the like their due respect as important historical personages who did good to humanity. But nothing more.

3. SCRIPTURES

All scriptures are held in awe either as words of God or divinely inspired utterances. I have read them in translation many times and am astonished by the emotional fervour they arouse. The most fervent are those who never bother about the meanings of the words they chant or recite by rote. I am sure that if they bothered to read them translated in a language they understood, a good bit of their enthusiasm would get diluted. Without exception, their contents are unscientific—one can't blame their authors as, in their times, science was little advanced. In addition to being contrary to science, they are repetitive and tediously boring. Those which enshrine codes of conduct and ethics undoubtedly serve a useful purpose in providing stability to society. Some passages in most of them are also of a high literary quality; I often quote the Bible, the *Quran*, the *Upanishads*, the *Geeta* and the *Granth Sahib* to buttress my arguments. But as works of literature, they do not compare with the great classics of Kalidas, Hafiz, Saadi, Shakespeare, Goethe, Tolstoy, Ghalib, Tagore, Iqbal, Faiz or even some lesser poets.

Mine is a personal reaction not shared by anyone else I have met. Most people are moved by their Scriptures. They recite or chant them, swaying their heads in ecstasy as they do so and claim to get peace of mind as a result. So who am I to tell them that their responses are conditioned by constant indoctrination and are a form of self-hypnosis? However, surely they cannot fault me when I maintain that the Scriptures, for whatever they are worth, should be read and understood and not worshipped. This is what Guru Nanak had to say about people who recite prayers without understanding them:

Sudh na budh na akal sar
Akkhar ka bheyo na lahant
Nanak say nar asl khar
je bin gun garabh karant

They have no comprehension, no brains in their heads
Who do not bother with the meaning of words.
O Nanak! Such are real donkeys
who vaunt their pride without having done any good.

It is ironic that it should be the followers of Nanak who proclaimed God to be *Nirankaar* (formless) and forbade the worship of idols, who treat the compilation of his and their gurus' writings as an idol worthy of worship. They drape the *Granth Sahib* in silk and brocade, rouse it in the mornings and put it to rest in the evenings, take it out in processions on holy days, and have it read by professional *granthis* all through the night while they themselves slumber. There are fixed rates for *granthis*: novices can be hired on cheaper terms than the adept whose pronunciation is clearer. Sikhs are not the only ones who indulge in such gross travesty of scriptural sanctity. Hindus have their own non-stop recitations; the Muslims go one step better by distributing portions of the *Quran* to the congregations which all of them read at the same time so that the entire *Quran* is finished in less than an hour.

4. PLACES OF WORSHIP

I believe that the only legitimate place of worship is the home. However, there are religions like Islam which enjoin congregational *Namaaz* in a public Mosque as a religious obligation. Christians also exhort attendance in churches on Sundays and at masses. In Hindu and Sikh temples, *keertans* and *kathaas* (sermons) are conducted regularly; without congregations to listen to them, they would lose much of their impact. In a country like India which has few diversions that the poor can afford such as clubs, pubs and picture-houses, places of worship provide free, harmless entertainment in the company of like-minded people. In recent years, however, places of worship have been turned into arenas of contention and misused to propagate ideas other than those strictly religious. A few years ago the *Kaaba* was the scene of a pitched battle. In India there have been prolonged litigations over the control of mosques and temples, *Waqf* funds and trusts. For the past many years the Golden Temple, notably the *Akal Takht*, have been under the control of young gun-toting men spouting hate rather than spreading the message of love that their gurus preached. And we are presently witnessing the amount of bad blood created over the Ram Janma Bhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. I am convinced that the time has come for the Government to forbid the building of any more places of worship—we have more than enough of them already—and to refuse permission to use public places for religious gatherings. And whenever a place of worship becomes a bone of contention or is misused for non-religious purposes by undesirable elements, its control and management must be taken over. Places of worship have created vested interests for priests, *pandas, granthis, imams* and *raagis* whose livelihood depends on exploiting them. This must be put an end to.

My sentiments regarding places of worship are summed up in a beautiful little couplet by a Punjabi Sufi poet:

Masjid ddhaa dey, Mandar ddhaa dey
Ddhaa dey jo kuchh ddhenda
Ik kisey da dil na ddhavein
Rabb dilaan vicch rehndaa

Break down the mosque, break down the temple
Break down whatever there is besides;
But never break a human heart
That is where God Himself resides.

5. PRAYER AND MEDITATION

It can scarcely be disputed that we Indians, be we Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Parsis spend more time in performing religious rituals than any other people in the world. The Hindi adage *Saat vaar aur aath tyohaar*—there are only seven days in the week but there are eight religious festivals—is by no means an over statement. Count the number of religious holidays, national and sectional, then add up the number of hours people spend everyday in saying their prayers, visiting temples, mosques, churches and *gurudwaras*, the days spent in pilgrimage to holy places, the hours taken up by *satsangs, pravachans, keertans, bhajans,* etc. It will come to a staggering total. Then ask yourself whether a poor developing country like ours can afford to lose so many millions of man hours in pursuits which produce no material benefits? Also ask yourself whether strict adherence to a routine of prayer, ritual or telling the beads of a rosary makes a person into a better human being? Is it not true that even dacoits pray for success of their nefarious missions before they embark on them? And aren't the worst tax-evaders and black-marketeers often devoutly religious?

On rare occasions when I visit *gurudwaras*, I make it a point to watch people making obeisance before the *Granth Sahib*. Those who take the longest time to rub their noses on the ground are usually those who more than others crave forgiveness for having lied, stolen, fornicated and made illicit money. There is an amusing doggerel about the *Potthohaaree* trading community from Rawalpindi and Campbellpur districts known for its business acumen as well as its religiosity.

Koor vee aseen mareney aan,
Ghat vee aseen toleyney aan
Par sacchey patshaah
Aseen naan vee teyra lainey aan

Lies we often tell
Short we do often measure
But true Lord,
Your name we also take.

I concede that it is entirely up to any individual how he or she decides to spend his or her time. If they get peace of mind through prayer and performance of ritual, they have every right to pray as long as they want to and wave candelabras of incense and tinkle bells to their hearts content. But what they, or anyone else, has no right to do is to impose their religiosity on other people. We as a people do this without consideration for the feelings and comforts of our fellow citizens. An instance of this total lack of concern for others is the use of loud-speakers calling for prayers *(azaan)* or blasting forth *keertans*, *bhajans* and *pravachans*. The craziest examples are all-night *jaagruns* which disturb the sleep of entire localities. Children are unable to concentrate on their studies, the sick unable to get rest, and if there has been a death in some *household*, the family are unable to mourn it in silence.

Another instance of imposing one's religious practices on others is the custom of taking out processions through crowded streets which, it cannot be denied, upset civic life. Christians and Muslims rarely take out processions. Catholics occasionally take idols of the Madonna or Saints around the streets and Shia Muslims take out *tazias* during Moharram. But Hindus and Sikhs indulge in them as a sacred birthright. Hindu gods and goddesses must be periodically taken out for airing; goddess Kali and Durga must be taken round the streets before they are immersed in rivers; so must Ganpaty, accompanied by loud shouts of 'Ganpaty Bapa Maurya'. The mammoth procession taken out annually at Puri brings all other activity in the city to a full-stop. Sikhs must take out processions on the birthdays and martyrdom anniversaries of their Gurus, no matter what Hindus or Muslims feel about them. It should be remembered that the most common cause of Hindu-Muslim riots are Hindu processions passing by mosques when Muslims are at prayer.

The Government must take the lead in curbing unnecessary exhibitions of religious fervour. It is committed through its Constitution to inculcate a scientific outlook on life. Instead of doing that, it allows official media like All India Radio and Doordarshan to propagate religions through the broadcast of celebrations and hymn singing. Religious broadcasts take up more time of our electronic media than any other single topic.

A modern fad, which has gained widespread acceptance amongst the semi-educated who wish to appear secular, is the practice of meditation. They proclaim with an air of smug superiority, "*Main mandir-vandir nahin jaata, meditate* *karta hoon"*. (I don't go to temples or other such places, I only meditate). The exercise involves sitting lotus-pose (*padma asana*), regulating one's breathing and emptying the mind to prevent it "jumping about like a monkey" from one (thought) branch to another. This intense concentration awakens the *kundalini* serpent coiled at the base of the spine, which then travels upwards through *chakras* (circles) till it reaches its destination in the cranium. Then the *kundalini* is fully *jaagrit* (roused) and the person is assumed to have reached his goal. What does meditation achieve? The usual answer is "peace of mind". If you further ask "and what does peace of mind achieve?" you will get no answer because there is none. Peace of mind is a sterile concept which produces nothing. The exercise may be justified as therapy for those with disturbed minds or those suffering from hypertension, but there is no evidence to prove that it enhances creativity. On the contrary, it can be established by statistical data that all the great works of art, literature, science and music were works of highly agitated minds, at times on the verge of collapse. Allama Iqbal's short prayer is pertinent.

Khuda tujhey kisee toofan say aashna kar dey
Key terey beher kee maujon mein iztiraab naheen

May God bring a storm in your life,
There is no agitation in the waves of your life's ocean.

A word which constantly appears in the Allama's writings is *talaatum*, restlessness of the mind, as the *sine qua non* of creativity.

I would like to sum up all I have said about prayer, ritual and meditation in a slogan I have coined as a motto for modern India: "Work is worship, but worship is not work"

6. ESSENTIALS OF A NEW FAITH

My new religion for India would be primarily based on the work ethic. We have an apt motto which needs to be put into effect: *araam haraam hai*. It will provide leisure-time to recoup energy to resume work which yields material benefits. We must not waste time because time is precious. There is a *hadith* (tradition of Prophet Mohammed) in which he is said to have exhorted: *La Tasabu ddhara Innad-hawa! Hoo Wallahoo* i.e. do not waste time, time is God. We must reject the concepts of *Sanyas* (retirement) and *Vanaprastha* (taking to the woods) and continue to labour till we are physically able to do so. Living idle lives on inherited or unearned incomes is as bad as beggary. Laws must be passed to limit the right to leave property to descendants and begging must be outlawed. Guru Nanak emphasised the work ethic in three commandments: *'Kirt karo, naam japo, vand chako* —work, worship and give in charity'. Note the order of priorities. In another hymn he wrote: *"Khat ghaal kicch hatthon dey, Nanak raah pacchaney sey"* i.e., he who earns, and gives some of it away, O Nanak, he has found the right way. He who does not contribute materially to society has no right to claim any benefits from it.

There are some professions much practiced in our country which not only contribute nothing to society but instead do a great deal of harm to it. The most popular of them is forecasting the future through astrology, casting horoscopes, palmistry, crystal-gazing and deciphering ancient texts like the *Bhrigu Samhita* and the *Sau Saakhee*. Of these, astrology is the most widespread and believed in as much by the highest placed as by the masses. Tantric rites were performed by Mrs Gandhi in her house. Many Chief Ministers of states, notably N.T. Rama Rao of Andhra and J.B. Patnaik of Orissa practiced black magic to overcome the influence of evil stars. Prime Minister V.P. Singh's Cabinet Secretary, Vinod Pandey, combined his official work with the reading of horoscopes of politicians. New ventures are undertaken only after making sure that the stars are in their proper positions.

In India, astrology has religious sanction. It must therefore be exorcised from the Indian religion of the future. That it is totally unscientific is beyond dispute. Astronomy is a science, astrology is not. What superstition is to religion, astrology is to astronomy—the illegitimate offspring of sick minds.

There are innumerable instances in our history where battles were lost because our commanders, instead of using their common sense, consulted astrologers about the most auspicious time to commence battle. There is no evidence whatsoever to prove that marriages made after matching horoscopes do better than those consummated without consulting them. I know of the case of a leading astrologer who contributes a weekly column on "What the Stars Foretell" to *The Hindustan Times* who arranged his daughter's marriage after reading her and her bridegroom's horoscopes. The marriage lasted a few months.

Belief in astrology has assumed menacing proportions and, unless banned by legal enactment, will continue to govern the lives of people to their detriment.

The ultimate purpose of religion should be to abstain from causing hurt to all living things—human, animals and vegetation, as far as possible. *Ahimsa Paramo Dharamo* i.e., non-violence is the paramount religion. When it comes to humans, we have to learn to avoid hurting them. Writes Hafiz:

Mai khor, mimbar ba-soz, O aatish andar kaaba zan
Sakin-e-butkhana baash, O Mardam azaari mekun

Drink wine, tear up the holy book, set fire to the house of God
Go make your house in a temple full of idols;
You may do all these but do not hurt a man.

Maulana Rumi echoed the same sentiment:

Dile badast aavar keh haj-e-akbar ast
az hazaaraan kaaba, yak-e-dil behtarast

Go into your hearts, it is the greatest pilgrimage
One heart is better than a thousand *Kaabas*.

I am not sure whether we are yet in a position to outlaw the killing of animals for food because in large parts of the world, human beings survive only by eating meat, fish and eggs. But this does not justify cruelty to animals nor killing them for sport. If I had anything to do with governance, I would outlaw *shikar* and the trapping of birds and animals.

Our new religion should have a vision of the future and should aim to provide measures that do not put the lives of the generations to come in jeopardy. Our population is rising at a rate suicidal to our future. If we continue to breed in the reckless way we are doing, we will continue to be short of food, clothing, housing, educational institutions, hospitals and our cities, towns and villages will fester with slums. Family planning must be made an integral part of our religion. We must disenfranchise parents who have more than two children and forbid them from holding elective offices. We must also make sterilisation of both parents on the birth of their second child compulsory. An undertaking to do so could be made a part of the vows taken at marriage. We have no right to over-load an already over-populated country.

The preservation of our environment must also become an essential part of our religion. We have the example of the Bishnoi community which rigorously forbids the cutting down of trees and killing of animals or birds. We have to go further. Felling of trees must be forbidden. The Hindu-Sikh custom of cremating the dead on funeral pyres must be stopped forthwith. There is nothing in the Hindu-Sikh religion requiring burning of the dead with wood. Large Hindu communities in the South bury their dead. Annadorai and M.G. Ramachandran were buried. So are Jain Munis. The amount of wood that is consumed in cremations is horrendous. It has been calculated that on an average one crore Indians die every year, of whom 80 per cent are Hindus or Sikhs. Roughly two quintals of wood is consumed in cremating one dead body, making a staggering total of millions of quintals of wood consumed every year. We are destroying our forests to dispose of our dead. The answer is not electric or gas crematoria but Hindu-Sikh cemetries with the proviso that no tombstones are erected on graves and the land is returned to agriculture every five years. The earth is in need of rejuvenation. Humans, when they die, should be returned to the earth from which, according to most religions, they emanate.

The use of wood for construction and furniture also needs to be severely curtailed. We have now enough synthetic substitutes to make all the buildings and furniture we need.

Reafforestation and greening of our land must be given top priority. It can be easily included as a part of our religious obligations as well as become a compulsory component of our educational system. At every religious ceremony, be it the thread-ceremony, baptism, marriage or death, provision should be made for planting a certain number of trees. Charities given in memory of departed souls should be devoted to planting of forests. Students passing their school leaving or degree exams should not be given their certificates unless they provide evidence of having planted a required number of trees and seen them grow in good health for a number of years. Polluting catchment areas, rivers and lakes should be condemned as irreligious acts. The use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides which make the land sterile and destroy bird and insect life must also be severely curtailed. The land must be considered sacred as must the lives of birds, beasts and insects. All ancient religions have something to say about the preservation of the environment as a religious duty. All we have to do is highlight these aspects and emphasize them with greater vigour.

Let me sum up my faith in time-worn cliches: a good life is the only religion. Ingersoll put it in more felicitous language, "Happiness is the only good; the place to be happy is here; the time to be happy is now; the way to be happy is to help others." Ella Wheeler Wilcox put the same in plainer words:

> "So many gods, so many creeds, so many paths that
> wind and wind.
> When just the art of being kind is all that the sad world
> needs."

Two

Quran for the Non-Muslims

Not many Muslims bother to read translations of their holy book or understand its message: they simply memorise a few passages in its original Arabic to be able to pray. Non-Muslims are even less familiar with it. And, more often than not, inhibited by pre-conceived prejudices from studying it. It is one of the world's greatest scriptures and some of its prose is as powerful as that of the Old Testament. My excuse for writing about it is the publication of yet another translation by the Delhi-born poet-novelist Ahmed Ali (*Al-Quran*, O.U.P). Other translations consulted by me are by A.J. Arberry, Marmaduke Pickthall, Yusuf Ali and N.J. Dawood.

I have no great enthusiasm for religious scriptures. I had to read many of them during my short tenure as visiting lecturer with the Department of Religion at Princeton University and later at Swarthmore College. I found them repetitive and boring. Till recently, I had not read the *Quran* from beginning to end—only passages quoted in other books and in biographies of Prophet Mohammed. I dedicated one full month to reading only the *Quran*. Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (Knopf) had been with me for 50 years; I had struggled with it with the help of a *Maulvi Sahib* in Lahore who recited the original while I followed the translation. I didn't get beyond the first three *suras* (chapters) when, for some reason, my mentor gave up the exercise. It was the same with A.J. Arberry's translation. I gave up after I had gone through half of the text. I do not rate Arberry very high as a translator because, in his anxiety for accuracy, he robs words of their music. And the *Quran* has a lot of music in it. It was Abdullah Yusuf Ali's version with commentaries that rekindled my ambition to read the holy book from cover to cover. Every morning I switched on to Radio Pakistan, listened to the *Qari* (one who recites the *Quran*) recite four *ayats* (verses) and followed the recitation with the Arabic text printed alongside the translation. Then I acquired N.J. Dawood's *The Koran* (Penguin). Dawood is an Iraqi settled in London. He has translated many Arabic classics including *Tales from the Thousand and one Nights*. His translation of the *Quran* was first published in 1916. Since then it has been reprinted over 30 times. It is probably the most widely read translation of the book. My only grievance against his otherwise eminently readable rendering is that he has changed the order in which the verses appear in the authenticated version. This confused me because I wanted to read it in the same order as Muslims do. And now we have Ahmed Ali's version. His novel *Twilight in Delhi* remains a classic on life in the Mughal city after Muslims had ceased to be the dominant power. He is also a poet, both in Urdu and English. Having had a not too distinguished career in the Pakistan Foreign Service, he came back to writing fiction and poetry. I did not know he knew Arabic; and knowing something of his style of living, never suspected he would turn to religion. He is very much like the painter Saadquain whose calligraphic paintings of verses of the holy book were the most highly rated. Saadquain was a hard drinker. Whatever else one may say about Ahmad Ali's knowledge of Arabic, there is no denying that he has been able to bring his poetic skills to bear on his translation of a work which he and his predecessors have candidly admitted defied translation. So, in one month I read three volumes of the *Quran*. That does not qualify me to describe myself as a *Hafiz* (one who knows the *Quran* by heart) but gives me enough self-confidence to write about it as a work of literary excellence.

There are many good reasons for reading the *Quran*. One is that it means more to Muslims than other scriptures mean to people who follow them. Muslims are people of this one book whereas other religions have a multiplicity of sacred texts. There is an old Latin saying *Cave ab homine unius libri*—'Beware of the man of one book'. Here we have hundreds of millions scattered over the globe who, even if they have read no other book, are familiar with the contents of this one. This single-minded devotion to a single book may have given rise to the apocryphal story about Muslim conquerors burning the library of Alexandria. "If these other books agree with our *Quran*, they are superfluous and should be destroyed. And if they disagree with it, they are wrong and deserve to be destroyed." Or words to that effect. If you wish to know what Muslim values of life are, you must read the *Quran*.

The *Quran* has no known author. Muslims believe that it was revealed by God to Prophet Mohammed in bits and pieces over a period of years. These revelations were memorised by his followers, written down on palm-leaves, camel hide, stones and bones. An authorised version was compiled some years after the Prophet's death. The copyright of the *Quran* vests in Allah who is its real author and not with the Prophet who only published it by word of mouth. How this happened was quite dramatic. But before we come to that, we should know something about the Prophet himself.

Mohammed was the posthumous child of Abdullah of the Qureish tribe and was born in Makka in A.D. 570. His mother died while he was still a child and he was brought up by his grandfather and his uncle. He grew to be a handsome man with a dynamic personality. His honesty became a byword in the city, and he was given the sobriquet *al amin* — worthy of trust. Though he remained unlettered, he was employed by tradesmen and accompained caravans to distant parts of the Arab world. His last employment was in the service of a rich widow, Khadija, who was fifteen years older than him. At the age of twenty five he married the forty year old Khadija. It was a close and fulfilling relationship and he refused to take another wife till after she was dead. The Prophet had three sons, all of whom died in infancy, and four daughters. Fatima was his youngest and favourite child. It was during his marriage to Khadija that the *Quran* began to be revealed to him. Khadija was the first to believe that God had nominated her husband as his messenger.

Mohammed was given to retiring to a cave not far from Makka where he spent long hours meditating in solitude. His mind was disturbed by the Makkan's lack of faith in the One God and their worshipping of goddesses alleged to be Allah's "daughters", whose idols had been installed in the *Kaaba*. One night, during the latter part of the month of *Ramadan* of the year A.D. 610, he was shaken out of his reverie by a voice commanding him to recite. "What shall I recite ?" he asked. The order to recite was repeated three times before the voice told him what to say:

"Recite in the name of your Lord who created man from clots of blood."

"Recite: Your Lord is the Most Bountiful one, who by pen taught man what he did not know."

In Arabic, the word *Quran* means recital. The night when this happened is known as the *Leilat ul Qadr* or the night of glory. It is recorded in one of the *Suras* as follows:

"We revealed the *Quran* on the night of *Qadr*. Would that you know what the night of *Qadr* is like. Better is the Night of *Qadr* than a thousand months."

Revelations followed one after the other. Some revealed at Makka were fairly lengthy; others revealed after he fled the city in A.D. 622 from which date begins the Muslim *Hijri* (from Hijrat – migration) calendar, were comparatively shorter. There are innumerable references in the *Quran* regarding the object of the revelations: "This *Quran* will guide men to that which is most upright .... that which we have revealed in the *Quran* is a balm and a blessing .... we have revealed the *Quran* with the truth and with the truth it has come down". The Prophet did not claim originality for the revelations and asserted that he was only confirming revelations sent earlier by God to the Jews and the Christians. He was chosen to be its purveyor in the Arabic tongue so that "You may grasp its meaning. It is a transcript of our eternal book, sublime and full of wisdom ... free from all faults and easy to remember."

There is a lot of repetition in the *Quran* of the stories of the Old Testament – of Abraham and Isaac, Moses and the Pharaoh, David, Ezekiel, Jonah, Lot and Jesus – all of them to warn people who defy Allah and his apostles of the consequences of doing so. Large portions of it deal with crimes and their appropriate punishments, laws of marriage, divorce, inheritance and what may be lawfully consumed and what is forbidden.

I was curious to find out whether consumption of alcohol is *haram* (forbidden) as orthodox Muslims of today maintain, or only disapproved of, as those who drink plead. I found as many as seven references to drink, all of which were somewhat ambiguous on the subject. The most quoted lines are from a chapter entitled *The Bee*, which run as follows: "We give you the fruits of the palm and of the vine, from which you derive intoxicants and wholesome food." Surely in this there is a sign for men of understanding. In a chapter entitled *The Ranks* there is a description of paradise where the deserving will be "well provided for, feasting on fruit and honoured in the gardens of delight .... they shall be served with a goblet filled at a gushing fountain, white, and delicious to those who drink it. It will neither dull their senses nor befuddle them." In a slightly different description in the chapter titled *Mohammed*, there is promise of "unpolluted water; and rivers of milk forever fresh; rivers of delectable wine and rivers of clearest honey." There are references to passing goblets from hand to hand, of ewers and cups of "purest wine that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason"; of "pure wine securely sealed, whose very dregs are musk; a wine tempered with the waters of *Tasnim*" (the name of a paradisal stream). This reassures me that my daily sin remains unproven.

My chief purpose in writing this piece is to inform readers of the literary excellence of the *Quran*. Before I do that I would like to introduce them to some verses which are most often recited by Muslims at prayer. I will use different translations so that you may make your own judgement of the quality of the translation. Much the most recited is *Al Fatiha*, the opening chapter usually described as *Ummul Quran*, the essence of the *Quran*, as well as *Sabaan min al-Mathani*, seven of the often repeated, and *al Hamd*, the invocation:

> Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds,
> The Beneficent, the Merciful.
> Owner of the Day of Judgement,
> Thee (Alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help.
> Show us the straight path,
> The path of those whom Thou hast favoured;
> Not (the path) of those who earn Thine anger nor
> of those who go astray.
>
> (Pickthall)

Most Muslim prayers end with the chanting of *durood* in praise of the Prophet. Most often this is from *Surah Ikhlas:*

> Say: He is God,
> The One and Only.
> God, the Eternal, Absolute.

He begetteth not,
Not is He begotten;
And there is none
Like unto Him.

(Yusuf Ali)

The *Ayat-ul-Qursi* or the *Throne verse* from the second surah *'The Cow (Al Baqareh)* has special significance for Muslims. It appears on many tombs; cups with this *ayat* inscribed on them are often used to drink out of in the belief that they have healing properties. They are also recited to ward off fear of evil spirits.

God: There is no God but He,
The living, sustaining, ever self-subsisting.
Neither does somnolence affect Him nor sleep.
To Him belongs all
that is in the heavens and the earth,
and who can intercede with Him except by His leave?
Known to Him is all that is present before men
and what is hidden
(in time past and time future),
and not even a little of His knowledge can they grasp
except what He will.
His seat extends over heavens and the earth,
And He tires not protecting them
He alone is all high and supreme.

(Ahmad Ali)

The next verse is often quoted to prove Islam's tolerance of other faiths:

"There is no compulsion in the matter of faith.
Distinct is the way of guidance now from error.
He who turns away from the forces of evil
and believes in God, will surely hold fast
to a handle that is strong and unbreakable."

(Ahmed Ali)

For some reason not clear to me, *Sura Yaseen* is described as 'the heart of the Quran'. It reassures people of the continuity of life: "It is We who will bring back the dead to life; We record the deeds of men and the marks they leave behind ... they laugh to scorn every apostle that comes to them... Let the once dead earth be a sign to them. We gave it up and from it produced grain for their sustenance. We planted it with the palm and the vine and watered it with gushing springs, so that men might feed on its fruit." The entrance gate of the Taj Mahal is festooned with lines from this *Sura*.

A great favourite with Muslims and lovers of literature is the *Sura Rehman* (The Merciful) with the line "Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?" repeated after every assertion:

> It is the Merciful who has taught the Koran.
> He created man and taught him articulate speech.
> The sun and the moon pursue their ordered course.
> The plants and the trees bow down in adoration.
> He raised the heaven on high and set the balance of all things, that you might not transgress it. Give just weight and full measure.
>
> He laid the earth for His creatures,
> with all its fruits and blossom-bearing palm,
> Chaff-covered grain and scented herbs.
> Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
>
> He Created man from potter's clay and the Jinn from smokeless fire.
> Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
>
> The Lord of the two easts is He, and the Lord of the two wests.
> Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
>
> He has let loose the two oceans: They meet one another.
> Yet between them stands a barrier which they cannot over-run.
> Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
>
> Pearls and corals come from both.
> Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

His are the ships that sail like banners upon the ocean.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

All who live on earth are doomed to die.
But the face of your Lord will abide for ever,
In all its majesty and glory.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

All who dwell in heaven and earth beseech Him.
Each day some new task employs Him.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Mankind and Jinn,
We shall surely find the time to judge you.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Mankind and Jinn
if you have power to penetrate the confines of heaven
and earth, then penetrate them!
But this you shall not do except with Our own authority.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Flames of fire shall be lashed at you, and molten brass.
There shall be none to help you.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

When the sky splits asunder and reddens like a rose or
stained leather
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

On that day neither man nor jinnee shall be
asked about his sins.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

The wrongdoers shall be known by their looks.
They shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

That is the Hell which the sinners deny.
They shall wander between fire and water fiercely seething.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

But for those that fear the majesty of their Lord,

there are two gardens
(Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?)
planted with shady trees.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Each is watered by a flowing spring.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Each bears every kind of fruit in pairs.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
They shall recline on couches lined with thick brocade,
and within their reach will hang the fruits of both gardens.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
They shall dwell with bashful virgins whom
neither man nor jinnee will have touched before.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Virgins as fair as corals and rubies.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Shall the reward of goodness be anything but good?
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny ?
And besides these there shall be two other gardens
(Which of your Lord's blessing would you deny?)
of darkest green.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
A gushing fountain shall flow in each.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Each planted with fruit-trees, the palm and the
pomegranate.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
In each there shall be virgins chaste and fair.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Dark-eyed virgins sheltered in their tents
(Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?)
whom neither man nor jinnee will have touched before.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
They shall recline on green cushions and rich carpets.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Blessed by the name of your Lord, the Lord of majesty and
glory!

(N J Dawood)

Another favourite is *Sura Nissa* (The Heights) with the admonition: "Do not corrupt the earth after it has been purged of evil ... He sends forth the winds as harbingers of His mercy, and when they have gathered up a heavy cloud, He drives it on to some dead land and lets the water fall upon it, bringing forth all manner of fruit."

Truth, assures the *Quran*, will always triumph over falsehood: God is the truthful one. "We will hurl the truth at falsehood and it shall smite it; and lo it will vanish". The retribution for falsehood and evil need not be sudden because people are given time for repentance. "I am with those who wait", says the *Quran*. The time for repentance should not be frittered away. Repentance releases forces of mercy, every tear drop shed in contrition washes away the stains of sin. The Prophet himself gave assurance that "one who repents sincerely is like one who never committed sin".

It should be noted that unlike Christianity, Islam does not ask people to love their enemies (which is contrary to nature) but only forgive them. Hate sin but not the sinner. It also justifies retaliation but limits it to the damage suffered. Contrary to popular notion, the *Quran* does not exhort Muslims to wage constant war against unbelievers (*Kafirs*). It is only against those who persecute believers or revile the *Quran* and the Prophet that violence is sanctioned. Otherwise every person is free to believe in what he thinks best. "To you, your way, and to me mine" say the revelations and give the assurance, "There is no compulsion in religion".

In *Sura Maida* (The Tablet Spread) Allah assured His Prophet "this day have I perfected your religion for you." In this *Sura* is a memorable verse illustrating the tolerance preached by Islam:

> "... that who ever killed a human being, except as a punishment for murder or other wicked crimes, should be looked upon as though he had killed all mankind; and that whoever saved a human life should be regarded as though he had saved all mankind."

(N J Dawood)

Several of the shorter *Suras* have powerful poetic imagery. To wit: "By the snorting war steeds, which strike fire with their hoofs as they gallop to the red at dawn and with a trail of dust split the foe in two; man is ungrateful to his Lord. To this he himself shall bear witness." And again: "I swear by the glory of sunset, by the night, and all that it brings together, by the moon, in her full perfection that you shall march onwards from state to state."

The *Sura* The Winds opens with memorable lines: By the dust-scattering winds and the heavily-laden clouds, by the swiftly-gliding ships, and by the angels who deal out blessings to all men that with which you are threatened shall be fulfilled and the Last Judgement shall surely come to pass."

There is a lot more to this book than I can put in a few columns. As a verse in *Sura Luqman* asserts:

> "If all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more seas to replenish it, were ink, the writing of Allah's words could never be finished."

The message may be summed up in two lines from *The Prophet*: "We will hurl Truth at Falsehood, until Truth shall triumph and Falsehood be no more."

In all, Mohammed had twenty-two years to reveal the *Quran* till he died in Madina in A.D. 632 at the age of 62. To this day it continues to fire the imagination of Muslims the world over. You owe it to yourself to find out the reason why.

Three

The Language of Love and Lust

No subject has been more written about in every language known in the world than love. And yet love has eluded definition because it embraces a wide range of emotions which have little in common with each other save passion. A mother's love for her child, the child's love for its mother; a man's love for God, his Guru, and his country are quite distinct from the love that envelopes men and women and craves for consummation in physical union. It defies differences of age, race, wealth, learning and looks. As Walter Scott wrote:

> Love rules the court, the camp, the grove
> And men below and saints above;
> For love is heaven, and heaven is love.

In love there is no calculation; no concern with social norms or consequences. "Of all forms of caution," wrote Bertrand Russel, "caution in love is perhaps the most fatal to true happiness."

Love can produce agony and ecstasy, fulfilment and frustration, uncertainty, anguish, jealousy and dire hate. All these have found expression in prose and poetry.

Everyone who has been in love has his own favourite quotations. I have taken excerpts from *Love Letters,* an anthology chosen by Antonia Fraser, *Love,* compiled by Walter De La Mare, *The British in Love* by Jilly Cooper, *The Body of Love,* edited by Derek Standford and *Poems From the Sanskrit* translated by John Brough. But most of this article is based on my personal anthology of Urdu (the most persuasive language of seduction), Sanskrit, French and English love poems.

Like most others, I grappled with the notion of love. Having experienced it many times, I pondered over it and finally put down my thoughts on paper. I read this paper at the Montreal Expo in 1967 before a somewhat bewildered and bemused Canadian audience. I started by posing a number of questions which I then proceeded to answer.

What exactly is this phenomenon called love? How does it erupt? How does it find expression? And how dissolution? Each one of us has his or her own theory based on personal experience and knowledge of others. I have my own. And it is this—the basic cause which makes us seek the love of another person in extreme loneliness. Gertrude Stein called this void inner loneliness. I prefer to describe it as inner solitude—the feeling of being all alone in this world. At times we feel this solitude with great poignancy and it is almost like physical pain. It can come upon us suddenly and without warning—as in the early hours of the morning. It can be brought on by the wail of a locomotive as it speeds through the black of the night, not knowing where it has come from or where it is going; it may be brought on by the sight of a heron—just one—in a vast sky at dusk.

This inner solitude is something of a paradox. At one time it is like an aching void begging to be filled by the warmth of the affection of another; at others it becomes a walled fortress with a notice bearing the warning, "Keep Out". What happens when two people meet can be best illustrated by depicting human beings as a series of concentric circles one inside the other—the innermost circle may be described as the circle of inner solitude. When two people meet and happen to like each other, they invite each other to trespass towards this innermost circle, to share this inner loneliness. The two sets of concentric circles begin to overlap. In actual life this invitation to trespass is expressed in exposure—baring of oneself—emotionally and physically. "Love desires that its secret be revealed," said Rumi. "If a mirror reflects nothing, what use is it?" The ideal equation is, of course, when two sets of circles completely overlap, when the integration between two human beings is emotionally and physically complete. This ideal equation seldom takes place, as in the process of getting to know each other (trespassing towards each other's inner solitudes), conflicts arise. One may not like the other's political or religious views; one may be irked by the other's mannerisms, dress, body odour, halitosis—just anything. Then there arises the desire to preserve one's inner solitude and the people concerned begin to raise their defences with the notice "Thus far but no further".

They may even expel the intruder outwards. To the extent which a person allows another to trespass towards his or her inner solitude, to that extent he or she is emotionally involved or in love with the other. There is no such thing as total, all consuming love. We are in different stages of love with different people.

Whatever its limitations, whatever its frustrations, love is the greatest, the most exhilerating experience of life. Said Jamì, the fifteenth century Sufi mystic: "The heart which is exempt from sickness of love is not a heart; the body deprived of the grief of love is only lemon and water. It is amorous disquietude which gives to the universe its eternal movement, it is the dizziness of love which makes the spheres turn around."

To the West, love's paradigm is man's perpetual quest for Helen. In the Orient, the same is expressed in the immortal tale of Laila and Majnun. Majnun was seen one day sifting sand with his hands. "What do you seek in the grains of sand?" someone asked him. "I seek Laila," replied Majnun. "And do you expect to find Laila in this way? Would a woman of such peerless beauty be found in this dust?" he was asked again. "I seek Laila everywhere," replied Majnun, "I seek her everywhere in the hope of finding her somewhere some day."

Shakespeare was certain that people fell in and out of love through their eyes:

Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?
How begot, how nourished?
Reply, Reply,
It is engendered in the eyes,
With gazing fed; and Fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.

An Urdu couplet supports this view:

Hota hai raaz-i-ishq-o-mohabbat inheen say paash
Aankhein zubaan nahin hain, magar bezubaan nahin.

The secrets of desire and love are revealed by the eyes
Eyes have no tongue but they are not without speech.

It did not occur to these poets that blind people also fall in love.

The earliest symptom of being infected by the love bug is to have a compulsive desire to keep repeating the beloved's name. However commonplace the name may be, love gives it a magical quality and one wants to repeat it like a *mantra*. In *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare exploded in sheer joy over his beloved's name, Olivia:

Make me a willow cabin at your gate
And call upon my soul within the house;

And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
Holla your name to the reverbrate hills,
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out, "Olivia".

Then there was Silvia:

Who is Silvia? What is she?
That all the swains commend her?
Holy, fair and wise is she;
The heaven such grace did lend her,
That she might admired be.

Next to drooling over the name of the beloved comes the desire to praise her looks. For many years, my favourite opening tribute used to be Byron's:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.

Marlowe went one better than Byron:

Oh, thou art fairer than the evening air
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars.

There are women who do not answer to descriptions like lovely or pretty: they are beautiful in a royal sense. There were Ingrid Bergman and Indira Gandhi. For these regal beauties there are Hillaire Belloc's lines:

Her face was like the King's command
When all the swords are drawn.

When in love, you cannot think of anything except the beloved. It becomes an obsession. You cannot concentrate on your work but keep playing, "He loves me, he loves me not."

Shakespeare was the supreme poet of love in all its manifestations. It would be impossible to abridge his outpourings in one article. In one of his sonnets, which I often quoted when in a state of depression, he writes of the uplifting potential of the beloved.

When, in disgrace with Fortune and Men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possest,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope.
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising–
Haply I think on thee; and then my state,
Like to the Lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love rememb'red such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with Kings.

Othello's speech when he receives Desdemona as she arrives after a very rough passage on the sea has been my favourite one expressing fulfilment:

If after every tempest came such calms,
May the winds blow, till they have wakened death.
Let every labouring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus high; and duck again as low,
As hells from Heaven. If it were now to die
Twere now to be most happy. For I fear,
My soul hath her content so absolute,
That not another comfort like to this,
Succeeds in Unknown fate.

The bard was incredibly naive in believing that love between "true minds" was everlasting, eternal.

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments: love is not love
Which alerts when alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh, no ! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

The trouble is that at the time when people fall in love, they become idealists and cannot conceive that they may not feel as intensely about the others as they did first. Here we have Matthew Arnold's impassioned pledge to remain ever faithful in love:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another: for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Unfortunately it is rare to find people who fall in love only once in their lifetime and only give up when "death does them part". Most of them are for ever falling in love with other people and hoping that the new involvement will prove more rewarding than the last. To wit Omar Khayyam's lines which married people could quote when engaged in an extra-marital love affair:

O love, if thou and I could with fate conspire
To change this sorry state of things entire;
Would we not shatter it to bits
And remould it nearer to our hearts desire?

The latest addition to my personal anthology of love poetry, some of which I have found to have lethal charms, I stumbled on while re-reading Christopher Fry's plays. Take for instance the following lines in *The Lady's Not for Burning* which express desire to the beloved:

"..... and if existence will
Molest a man with beauty, how can he help
Trying to impose on her the boundary
of his two bare arms ?"

I am not quite sure what the following lines mean, but they sound quite profound:

"What is deep, as love is deep, I'll have deeply.
What is good, as love is good, I'll have well."

Love is complete surrender to the beloved. This is beautifully proved in Ruth's prayer in the Old Testament. Although addressed to her mother-in-law, they could as well be addressed to the beloved:

"Whither thou goest, I will go,
And whither thou lodgest, I will lodge
Thy people will be my people
And thy God my God
Where thou diest, I'll die
And there will I be buried."

Not many English poets except Robert Browning accepted such total surrender as expression of love. "All the Latin I know is *amo*, I love," he wrote. He also accepted the traditional role of men being seekers, women the sought after:

Escape me? Never
Beloved!
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both
While the one eludes,
Must the other persue.

Urdu has many memorable couplets on different facets of love, of which the quest, the indifference and cruelty of the beloved seemed to obsess poets more than fulfilment. For Meer Taqi Meer, the quest was perennial and never-ending.

Jaisey Naseem, har sehar, teyree hee karoon hoon justajoo
Khana-ba-khaana, dar-ba-dar, shahr-ba-shahr, Koo-ba-koo.

Like the morning breeze, it is thee alone I seek
From house to house, door to door, city to city and lane to lane.

There are Agha Hashr Kashmiri's beautiful lines:

Sab kuchch khuda say maang liya
Tujh ko maang kar;
Utthay nahin hain haath merey
Is dua kay baad

I asked of God all I could ask for
When I asked for you;
Once my prayer was answered
I did not raise my hands in prayer again.

Having got his heart's desire, the poet expresses his gratitude not to God, the granter of wishes, but to his beloved. To wit Majrooh:

Mujhey sahal ho gaeen manzilein,
Yeh havaa kay rukh badal gaye,
Tera haath haath mein aa gayaa
Keh Chiraagh raah mein jal gaye.

When your hand I took in mine
Lamps along the route burnt bright;
Winds changed course to ease my way
My goal appeared in easy sight.

Then there is Momin's reminder to his unfaithful mistress:

Voh jo ham mein tum mein qarar ththa,
tumhen yaad ho key na yaad ho
Vahee yaanee vaada nibah ka,
tumhein yaad ho keh na yaad ho.

The pledge that you and I made together,
You may remember or may have forgot
The vow to remain true to each other,
You may remember or may have forgot.

Vo jo lutf mujh pey ththey peyshtar,
Vo karm ke ththa merey haal par
Mujhey sab hai yaad zara zara,
tumhein yaad ho keh na yaad ho

The love that you had for me some time ago,
The concern you had for my lot,
I remember some of it,
You may remember it or may have forgot.

There are people who, instead of looking forward to meeting their beloved, want to get away so that they can write love letters to them. After the gushings of poetry, the prose of love-letters sounds somewhat prosaic. A good example of it going beyond variations of the "I-love-you" theme is the correspondence Rousseau carried on with Countess Sophie D'Doudetot. In one written in the summer of A.D. 1757 he says:

> "Come Sophie, that I may torture your unjust heart in order that I, on my side, may be merciless towards you. Why should I spare you, whilst you rob me of reason, of honour, and life? Why should I allow your days to pass in peace, you, who make mine unbearable! Ah, much less cruel would you have been, if you had driven a dagger into my heart, instead of the fateful weapon, which kills me! Look what I was and what I am now; look to what a degree you have abased me. When you deigned to be mine, I was more than a man; since you have driven me from you, I am the least of mortals. I have lost all reason, all understanding, and all courage; in a word, you have taken everything from me!

Victor Hugo, writing to Adele Foucher (March 15, 1822) expresses his gratitude to favours received in the following words:

"Adele, to what follies, what delirium, did not your Victor give way during these everlasting eight days! Sometimes I was ready to accept the offer of your admirable love; I thought that if pushed to the last extremity by the letter from my father, I might realize a little money, and then carry you away—you, my betrothed, my companion, my wife—away from all those who might want to disunite us; I thought we could cross France, I being nominally your husband, and go into some other country which would give us our rights. By day we would travel in the same carriage, by night sleep under the same roof."

Robert Schuman enjoyed writing to his wife; sometimes he wrote several letters in the same day. One goes as follows:

> How happy your last letters have made me—those since Christmas Eve; I should like to call you by all the endearing epithets, and yet I can find no lovelier word than the simple word 'dear', but there is a particular way of saying it.
>
> My dear one, then, I have wept for joy to think that you are mine, and often wonder if I deserve you. One would think that no one man's heart and brain could stand all the things that are crowded into one day. Where do these thousands of thoughts, wishes, sorrows, joys and hopes, come from? Day in, day out, the procession goes on. But how light-hearted I was yesterday and the day before! There shone out of your letters so noble a spirit, such faith, such a wealth of love! What would I not do for love of you, my own Clara! The Knights of old were better off; they could go through fire or slay dragons to win their ladies, but we of today have to content ourselves with more prosaic methods, such as smoking fewer cigars, and the like. After all, though, we can love, knights or no knights; and so, as ever, only the times change, not men's hearts.

The composer Franz Liszt could wax lyrical in his prose "My heart overflows with emotion and joy! I do not know what heavenly languor, what infinite pleasure permeates it and burns me up. It is as if I had never loved! Tell me whence these uncanny disturbances spring, these inexpressible foretastes of delight, these divine tremors of love. Oh! all this can only spring from me, sister, angel, woman, Marie ! ...All this can only be, is surely nothing less than a gentle ray streaming from your fiery soul, or else some secret poignant teardrop which you have long since left in my breast."

Nathaniel Hawthorne could write poetic-prose as well as he wrote poetry:

> "Dearest, I wish I had the gift of making rhymes, for me thinks there is poetry in my head and heart since I have been in love with you. You are a Poem. Of what sort, then? Epic? Mercy on me, no! A sonnet? No; for that is too labored and artificial. You are a sort of sweet, simple, gay, pathetic ballad, which Nature is singing sometimes with tears, sometimes with smiles, and sometimes with intermingled smiles and tears."

Napoleon Bonaparte, known more as a soldier than a man of letters, could write touching love letters to Josephine:

> "I have not spent a day without loving you. I have not spent a night without embracing you; I have not so much as drunk a single cup of tea without cursing the pride and ambition which force me to remain separated from the moving spirit of my life. In the midst of my duties, whether I am at the head of my army or inspecting the camps, my beloved Josephine stands alone in my heart, occupies my mind, fills my thoughts. If I am moving away from you with the speed of the Rhone torrent, it is only that I may see you again more quickly. If I rise to work in the middle of the night, it is because this may hasten by a matter of days the arrival of my sweet love."

In one of his long letters to Adele Foucher, Victor Hugo explained the nature of human love and the essential role of sex in its fulfilment:

> "There is one word, Adele, which we appear until now to have been afraid of using—the word love; nevertheless what I feel for you really is genuine love; the problem is one of knowing whether what you feel for me is also love. This letter will remove this doubt upon whose resolution my entire life depends.
>
> Listen, within us there is a being not composed of physical matter, like an exile inside our bodies which it must outlive for all eternity. This, being essentially purer and of a superior nature, is our soul. It is the soul which gives birth to all passions, all raptures, which conceives the notion of God and heaven. I speak of these things in a high-flown manner, but this is necessary in order to be understood unambiguously; I hope that this style does not seem strange to you, but we are talking of matters which demand simple but elevated language. I will continue. The soul, so superior to the body to which it is bound would remain on earth in intolerable solitude, if it were not allowed to some extent to choose from among all the souls of other men a partner to share with it misery in this life and bliss in eternity. When two souls, which have sought each other for however long in the throng, have finally found each other, when they have seen that they are matched, are in sympathy and compatible, in a word, that they are alike, there is then established for ever between them a union, fiery and pure as they themselves are, a union which begins on earth and continues for ever in Heaven. This union is love, true love, such as in truth very few men can conceive of, that love which is a religion, which deifies the loved one, whose life comes from devotion and passion, and for which the greatest sacrifices are the sweetest delights. This is the love which you inspire in me, which you are bound to feel one day for another, if, to my everlasting misfortune, you do not already feel it for me. Your soul is made to love with the purity and passion of angels;

but perhaps it can only love another angel, in which case I must tremble with apprehension.

The word, Adele, does not comprehend such passions which are the prerogative only of certain beings who are granted happiness like yours or misery like mine. For the world, love is nothing more than a carnal appetite, a vague inclination which indulgence states and absence destroys. That is why you have heard it said, by a strange misuse of words, that the passions are ephemeral. Alas ! Adele, are you aware that the word 'passion' means 'suffering' and do you believe, in all honesty, that there is any suffering in these love affairs of common men, which are apparently so turbulent, but in fact so insipid? No, immortal love is eternal, because the being which experiences it is immortal. It is our souls which love and not our bodies.

At this point, however, bear in mind that nothing should be carried to extremes. I am not claiming that our bodies are of no importance in the greatest of bonds. The good Lord has understood that, without physical intimacy, there could never be any intimacy of the soul, because two beings which love one another must to some extent share their thoughts and their deeds. This is one of the reasons why he has created the attraction of one sex for the other, which is the only indication of the desire of marriage. Thus, in youth, the union of the flesh works to strengthen the union of souls, which, remaining young and invisible, strengthens in its turn the union of the flesh in old age and continues after death."

There is a lot of finesse as well as plenty of earthiness in Sanskrit love poetry. From the *Ramayana* we have a lover exulting over the simple fact that he breathes the same air as his beloved:

"Blow, wind, to where my loved one is,
Touch her, and come and touch me soon.
I'll feel her gentle touch through you,

And meet her beauty in the moon.
These things are much for one who loves–
A man can live by them alone–
That she and I breathe the same air,
And that the earth we tread is one."

Bhartrihari admitted that:

"The clear bright flame of man's discernment dies
When a girl clouds it with her lamp-black eyes."

He chastised his fellow poets for making much of the beloved's beauty:

"Her face is not the moon, nor are her eyes
Twin lotuses, nor are her arms pure gold:
She's flesh and bone. What lies the poets told
Ah, but we love her, we believe the lies."

He explores the woman's body as if it were a land-scape:

"If the forest of her hair
Calls you to explore the land,
And her breasts, those mountains fair,
Tempt that mountaineer, your hand
Stop ! before it is too late
Love, the brigand, lies in wait."

Adultery was not frowned upon as a venal sin. Dharmakirti thus encourages a married girl to go to her illegitimate tryst:

"The road is rough; and, oh, the moon is bright
Suppose my husband should discover !
People may talk – but can I bear tonight
To disappoint my lover?
And so she walked a step or two, and then
Turned and came back again."

Amaru exhorted fearlessness in the fulfilment of love:

"Where are you going in the dead of night?
To meet my love who is life and death to me.
And are you not afraid to walk alone?

How can I be alone? Love keeps me company."

As good as any definition of love that I have come across is "when spirit and body interanimate". John Donne was quite clear that the ultimate aim of every affair of the heart was coupling of the bodies:

"Who ever loves, if he does not propose
The right true end of love, he's one that goes
To sea for nothing but to make him sick."

DeGourmont wrote in his *Natural Philosophy of Love,* "Given the two chief pieces of the apparatus, the sword and the scabbard, nature, as one might say, leaves it to the imagination of each species to decide the best manner of using them."

The Old Testament has some exquisitely sensuous love poetry. An all-time favourite is the following from the *Song of Songs*:

My beloved spoke, and said unto me
Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away.
For, lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of the singing of birds is come,
And the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;
The fig tree putteth forth her green figs,
And the vines with the tender grape
Give a good smell.
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away
O my dove, thou art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs,
Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice;
For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.
Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vine;
For our vineyards are in blossom.
My beloved is mine, and I am his.
He feedeth his flock among the lilies.
Until the day break, and the shadows flee away,

Turn, my beloved ....
By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth;
I sought him, but I found him not.

However censorious the church was about sex, many of the most godfearing and upright men of letters wrote about it in explicit detail. Milton justified it in the following lines:

Whatever hyprocites austerely talk
Of purity, and place, and innocence,
Defaming as impure what God declares
Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to all.
Our Maker bids increases; who bids abstain
But our Destroyer, foe to God and Man?

For sheer abandon to lascivious pleasure, there is nothing to match John Donne:

Licence my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.

Then there was the American, Walt Whitman, who captured the ethereal quality of a perfect *maithun*.

.... love-flesh
Swelling and deliciously aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous,
Quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,
Bridegroom night of love working surely and
Softly into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet flesh'd day.

Shelley was more lyrical than Whitman:

... and over all
A mist was spread, the sickness of a deep
And speechless swoon of joy, as might befall
Two disunited spirits when they leap
In union form this earth's obscure and fading sleep.

Understandably women writers were more reserved in their expression on intimacy. But Judith Wright had no feminine inhibitions:

O move in me, my darling,
For now the sun must rise;
The sun that will draw open
The lids upon your eyes.

O wake in me, my darling.
The knife of day is bright
To cut the thread that binds you
Within the flesh of night.

Four

The Monsoon in Literature

Monsoon is not another word for rain. As its original Arabic name (*mausem*) indicates, it is a season. There is a summer monsoon as well as a winter monsoon, but it is only the nimbus south-west winds of summer that make a *mausem*—the season of rains. The winter monsoon is like a quick shower on a cold and frosty morning. It leaves one chilled and shivering. Although it is good for the crops, people pray for it to end. Fortunately, it does not last very long.

The summer monsoon is quite another affair. It is preceded by several months of working up a thirst so that when the waters come they are drunk deep and with relish. From the end of February, the sun starts getting hotter and spring gives way to summer. Garden flowers wither. Wild flowering trees take their place. Then the trees lose their flowers as well as their leaves. Their bare branches stretch up to the sky as if begging for water; but there is no water. The sun comes up earlier than before and licks up the drops of dew before the fevered earth can moisten its lips. It sears the grass and thorny scrub till they catch fire. The fires spread and dry jungles burn like matchwood.

The sun goes on, day after day, from east to west, scorching relentlessly. The earth cracks up and deep fissures open their gaping mouths, asking for water; but there is no water—only the shimmering haze at noon, making mirage lakes of quicksilver. Poor villagers take their thirsty cattle out to drink. Both man and beast are struck dead. The rich wear sunglasses and hide behind the curtains of *khas* fibre on which their servants pour water.

The sun makes an ally of the breeze. It heats the air till it becomes the *loo* and sends it on its errand. Even in the intense heat, the *loo's* warm caresses are sensuous and pleasant. It brings up prickly heat. It produces a numbness which makes the head nod and the eye heavy with sleep. It brings on a stroke which takes its victim as gently as the breeze bears a fluff of thistledown.

Then comes a period of false hope. The temperature drops. The air becomes still. From the southern horizon a black wall begins to advance. Hundreds of kites and crows fly ahead. Can it be ... ? No, it is a dust-storm. A fine powder begins to fall. A solid mass of locusts covers the sun. They devour whatever is left on the trees and in the field. Then comes the storm itself. In furious sweeps it smacks open doors and windows, banging them forward and backward, smashing their glass panes. Thatched roofs and corrugated iron sheets are borne aloft like bits of paper. Trees are torn up by the roots and fall across power lines. The tangled wires electrocute people and set fire to houses. All this happens in a few seconds. Before you can say Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, the gale is gone. The dust hanging in the air settles on your books, furniture and food; it gets in eyes and ears and throat and nose.

This happens over and over again until the people lose all hope. They are disillusioned, dejected, thirsty and sweating. The prickly heat on the back of their necks is like emery paper. There is another lull. A hot petrified silence prevails. Then comes the shrill, strange call of a bird. Why has it left its cool bosky shade and come out in the sun? People look up wearily at the lifeless sky. Yes, there it is with its mate ! They are like large black-and-white bulbuls with perky crests and long tails. They are Pied Crested Cuckoos (Clamator Jacobinus) who have flown all the way from Africa ahead of the monsoon.

Isn't there a gentle breeze blowing? And hasn't it a damp smell? And wasn't the rumble which drowned the bird's anguished cry the sound of thunder? The people hurry to the roofs to see. The same ebony wall is coming up from the east. A flock of herons fly across. There is a flash of lightning which outshines the daylight. The wind fills the black sails of the cloud and they billow out across the sun. A profound shadow falls on the earth. There is another clap of thunder. Big drops of rain fall and dry up in the dust. A fragrant smell rises from the earth. Another flash of lightning and another crack of thunder like the roar of a hungry tiger.

It has come ! Sheets of water, wave after wave. The people lift their faces to the clouds and let the abundance of water cover them. Schools and offices close. All work stops as men, women and children run madly about the streets, waving their arms and shouting 'ho, ho' – hosannas to the miracle of the monsoon.

The monsoon is not like ordinary rain which comes and goes. Once it is on, it stays for three to four months. Its advent is greeted with joy. Parties set out for picnics and litter the countryside with the skins and stones of mangoes. Women and children make swings on branches of trees and spend the day in sport and song. Peacocks spread their tails and strut about with their mates; the woods echo with their shrill cries.

After a few days the flash of enthusiasm is gone. The earth becomes a big stretch of swamp and mud. Wells and lakes fill up and burst their bounds. In towns, gutters get clogged and streets become turbid streams. In villages, mud walls of huts melt in the water and thatched roofs sag and descend on the inmates. Rivers, which keep rising steadily from the time the summer's heat starts melting the snows, suddenly turn to floods as the monsoon spends itself on the mountains. Roads, railway tracks, and bridges go under water. Houses near the river banks are swept down to the sea.

With the monsoon, the tempo of life and death increases. Almost overnight, grass begins to grow and leafless trees turn green. Snakes, centipedes and scorpions are born out of nothing. At night, myriads of moths flutter around lamps. They fall in everybody's food and water. Geckos dart about filling themselves with insects till they get heavy and fall off ceilings. Inside rooms, the hum of mosquitoes is maddening. People spray clouds of insecticide and the floor becomes a layer of wriggling bodies and wings. Next evening, there are many more fluttering around the lampshades and burning themselves in the flames. The monsoon has its own music. Apart from thunder, the rumble of storm clouds and the pitter-patter of rain drops, there is the constant accompaniment of frogs croaking. Aristophanes captured their sound: *Brek-ek-ek-ek, Koax, Koax*!

While the monsoon lasts, the showers start and stop without warning. The clouds fly across, dropping their rain on the plains as it pleases them, till they reach the Himalayas. They climb up the mountain sides where the cold squeezes the last drops of water out of them. Lightning and thunder never cease. Then the season of rains gives way to autumn.

It is not surprising that much of India's art, music and literature is concerned with the summer monsoon. Innumerable paintings depict people on rooftops looking eagerly at the dark clouds billowing out from over the horizon with flocks of herons flying in front. Of the many melodies of Indian music, *Raga Megha Malhar* is the most popular because it brings to mind the distant echoes of the sound of the thunder and the falling of raindrops. It brings the odour of the earth and green vegetation to the nostrils; the cry of the peacock and the call of the koel to the ear. The commonest theme in Indian songs is the longing of lovers for each other when the rains are in full swing. There is no joy greater than union during monsoon time; there is no sorrow deeper than separation during the season of the rains.

The Indian's attitude towards clouds and rain remains fundamentally different from that of the Westerner. To the one, clouds are symbols of hope; to the other, of despair. The Indian scans the heavens and if nimbus clouds blot out the sun, his heart fills with joy. The Westerner looks up and if there is no silver lining edging the clouds, his depression deepens. The Indian talks of someone he respects and looks up to as a great shadow, like the one cast by the clouds when they cover the sun. The Westerner, on the other hand, looks on a shadow as something evil and refers to people of dubious character as shady types. For him, his beloved is like the sunshine. An Indian's notion of a beautiful woman is one who has hair as black as monsoon clouds and eyes that flash like lightning. The Westerner escapes clouds and rain whenever he can seek sunnier climes. An Indian, when the rains come, runs out into the street shouting with joy and lets himself be soaked to the skin.

The monsoon has exercised the minds of Indian writers (as well as painters and musicians) over the centuries. Some of the best pieces of descriptive verse were composed by India's classical poets writing in Sanskrit. Amaru (date uncertain, but earlier than the 9th century AD) describes the heat of the summer and the arrival of the monsoon:

> The summer sun, who robbed the pleasant nights,
> And plundered all the water of the rivers,
> And burned the earth, and scorched the forest-trees,
> Is now in hiding; and the autumn clouds,
> Spread thick across the sky to track him down,
> Hunt for the criminal with lightning-flashes.
> *(Poems From The Sanskrit:* John Brough, Penguin Books)

To be away from one's wife or sweetheart during the season of the rains can be torture:

At night the rain came, and the thunder deep
Rolled in the distance; and he could not sleep,
But tossed and turned, with long and frequent sighs,
And as he listened, tears came to his eyes;
And thinking of his young wife left alone,
He sobbed and wept aloud until the dawn.
And from that time on
The villagers made it a strict rule that no traveller
Should be allowed to take a room for the night in the village.

(*Poems From the Sanskrit*: John Brough, Penguin Books)

Literary conceit and facetiousness have always been practised by Indian poets. Thus Sudraka (probably 3-4 century AD) has a girl taunt a cloud:

Thundercloud, I think you are wicked.
You know I'm going to meet my own lover,
And yet you first scare me with your thunder,
And now you're trying to caress me
With your rain-hands!

(*Poems From the Sanskrit*: John Brough, Penguin Books)

Bhartrihari (7th Century AD or a little earlier) went into erotic ecstasies combining descriptions of the monsoon with dalliance:

Flashing streaks of lightning
Drifting fragrance of tropical pines,
Thunder sounding from gathering clouds,
Peacocks crying in amorous tones—
How will long-lashed maids pass
These emotion-laden days in their lovers' absence?

(*Bhartrihari Poems*: Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller,
Columbia University Press, 1967)

While the downpour lasts, there is little that lovers can do besides staying in bed and making love:

Heavy rain keeps lovers
Trapped in their mansions;

In the shivering cold, a lord
Is embraced by his long-eyed maid
And winds bearing cool mists
Allay their fatigue after amorous play.
Even a dreary day is fair
For favoured men who nestle in love's arms.

Monsoon is not only trysting time for humans but also for animals and birds, above all the national bird, the peacock. Yogesvara (circa 800 AD) describes the courtship dance in these beautiful lines:

With tail-fans spread, and undulating wings
With whose vibrating pulse the air now sings,
Their voice lifted and their beaks stretched wide,
Treading the rhythmic dance from side to side,
Eyeing the raincloud's dark, majestic hue,
Richer in colour than their own throats' blue
With necks upraised, to which their tails advance,
Now in the rains the screaming peacocks dance.

(*Poems From the Sanskrit*: John Brough)

Subandhu (late 6th century A.D.) in his *Vasavadatta* is exuberant in his welcome of the monsoon:

> "The rainy season had arrived. Rivers overflowed their banks. Peacocks danced at eventide. The rain quelled the expanse of dust as a great ascetic quells the tide of passion. The *chataka* birds were happy. Lightning shone like a bejewelled boat of love in the pleasure pool of the sky; it was like a garland for the gate of the place of paradise; like a lustrous girdle for some heavenly beauty; like a row of nail-marks left upon the cloud by its lover, the departing day."
>
> "The rain was like a chess player, while yellow and green frogs were like the chessmen jumping in the enclosures of the irrigated fields. Hailstones flashed like pearls from the necklaces of heavenly birds. By and by, the rainy season yielded to autumn, the season of bright dawns; of

parrots rummaging among rice-stalks; of fugitive clouds. In autumn the lakes echoed with the sound of herons. The frogs were silent and the snakes shrivelled up. At night the stars were unusually bright and the moon was like a pale beauty."

The prolonged monsoon can become tiresome for some people. Maithili poet Vidyapati (1352-1448) writes about their predicament:

Clouds break.
Arrows of water fall
Like the last blows
That end the world.
The night is thick
With lamp-black for the eyes.
Who keeps so late a tryst?
The earth is a pool of mud
With dreaded snakes at large.
Darkness is everywhere,
Save where your feet
Flash with lightning.

Another body of literature where many references to the monsoon can be found are the *baramasis* (twelve months) composed by poets of northern India. We are not sure when the tradition of composing *baramasis* began but by the 16th century it had become well established and most poets tried their hand at describing the changing panorama of nature through the year. The Sikh's holy scripture, the *Granth Sahib* has two *baramasis* (Punjabi version of *baramasis)* of which the one composed by the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, (1469-1539) in *Raga Tukhari* has some memorable depictions of the weather. Since the monsoons in the Punjab break sometime after mid-July, Nanak first describes the summer's heat in the verse on *Asadh* (June-July):

In *Asadh* the sun scorches
Skies are hot
The earth burns like an oven

Waters give up their vapours
It burns and scorches relentlessly
Thus the land fails not
To fulfil its destiny
The sun's chariot passes the mountain tops
Long shadows stretch across the land
And the cicada calls from the glades.
The beloved seeks the cool of the evening.
If the comfort she seeks be in falsehood,
There will be sorrow in store for her.

Asadh is followed by *Savan* (July-August) when the monsoons break in northern India.

O my heart, rejoice ! It's *Savan*
The season of nimbus clouds and rain
My body and soul yearn for my Lord.
But my lord is gone to foreign lands.
If he returns not, I shall die pining for Him.

Since the monsoon is trysting time for lovers and thus engrossed they tend to forget their Maker, Nanak admonishes them in his verse on *Bhadon* (August-September)

In the month of *Bhadon*
I lose myself in a maze of falsehood
I waste my wanton youth
River and land are one endless expanse of water
For it is the monsoon, the season of merry-making
It rains,
The nights are dark,
What comfort is it to the wife left alone?
Frogs croak
Peacocks scream
The *papeeha* calls 'peeoh, peeoh',
The fangs of serpents that crawl,
The stings of mosquitoes that fly
Are full of venom.
The seas have burst their bounds in the ecstasy
Of fulfilment

Without the Lord I alone am bereft of joy
Whither shall I go?
Says Nanak, ask the guru the way
He knoweth the path which leads to the Lord.

The poetic tradition has continued to the present times. India's only Nobel Laureate in literature, Rabindra Nath Tagore (1861-1941) has a beautiful piece in his most celebrated work *Gitanjali*:

Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens
Ah, love, why dost thou let me wait
Outside at the door all alone?
In the busy moments of the noontide
Work I am with the crowd,
But on this dark lonely day
It is only for thee I hope
If thou showest me not thy face, if thou leavest me
Wholly aside, I know not how I am to pass these
Long, rainy hours.
I keep gazing on the far-away gloom of the sky and
My heart wanders wailing with the restless wind.

These are but a few examples from Sanskrit and other languages of northern India which illustrate the impact the monsoons make on the sensitive minds of poets and men of letters. Similar examples are available from all other languages and dialects spoken in the rest of the country.

Many foreign writers have given vivid descriptions of the monsoon. Of these, there is a memorable one by L.H. Niblett in his *India in Fable, Verse and Story* published in 1938:

The sky was grey and leaden. The moon was dull and pale,
Suspended high, the dust-clouds, in canopying veil,
O' erlooked wide fields and hamlets of India's arid plains
Sun-baked and scorch'd and yellow—a thirsting, for the Rains.
The atmosphere was stifling; the air was still as death,
As the parched *jheels* emitted their foul and charnel breath;
Storms clouded the horizon; a flash across the sky;
A boom of far-off thunder, and a breeze like a distant sigh,

'Tis the dirge of a dying summer; the music of the gods;
Dead leaves rise up and caper; the Melantolia nods:
Tall trees to life awaken: the top-most branches sway
And the long grass is waving along the zephyr way.
A mantle of red shadow envelops all around
The trees, the grass, the hamlets, as the
storm-clouds forward bound.
Of a sudden, comes a whirl wind, dancing, spinning rapidly;
Then gust on gust burst quick, incessant, mad, rushing furiously.
A crash-and the Monsoon's on us, in torrents everywhere,
With the bellowing roar of thunder and lightning, flare on flare.
The tempest's now abated; a hush falls o'er the scene;
The myriad birds start chatt'ring and the grass again is green.
The fields like vast, still mirrors, in sheets of water lie.
The frogs, in droning chorus, sing coarse their lullaby
Each tank and pool is flooded; great rivers burst their banks
King summer's reign is ended; the monsoon sovereign ranks.

E.M. Forster, the celebrated author of *A Passage to India* has an equally vivid portrayal of the rainy season in his *The Hill of Devi* (published by Edwin Arnold 1953).

"The first shower was smelly and undramatic. Now there is a new India—damp and grey, and but for the unusual animals, I might think myself in England. The full monsoon broke violently and upon my undefended form. I was under a little shelter in the garden, sowing seeds in boxes with the assistance of two aged men and a little boy. I saw black clouds and felt some spots of rain. This went on for a quarter of an hour, so that I got accustomed to it, and then a wheel of water swept horizontally over the ground. The aged men clung to each other for support. I don't know what happened to the boy. I bowed this way and that as the torrent veered, wet through ofcourse, but anxious not to be blown away like the roof of palm leaves over our head. When the storm decreased or rather became perpendicular, I set out for the Palace, large boats of mud forming on either foot. A rescue expedition, consisting of an umbrella and a servant, set out to meet me, but the umbrella blew inside out and the servant fell down."

In every part of India, peasants have their own way of predicting the monsoon. There is a general belief that the more intense the heat during April, May and June, the heavier will be the rains that follow. In Northern India some varieties of thorny bushes like the *Karwand* and *Heever* break into tiny leaf a month before the rains break. The *Papeeha* (Hawk Cuckoo or the brain-fever bird) is loudest during the hot days. The Pied Crested Cuckoo, (Clamator Jacobinus) also known as *Megha Papeeha* — the song-bird of the clouds—has its natural habitat in East Africa. Taking advantage of the monsoon winds it flies across the Indian Ocean and the Arabian sea to arrive on the Western Coast of India a day or so ahead of the rain-bearing clouds. It is rightly regarded as the monsoon herald. It flies at a more leisurely pace inland and is usually sighted in Delhi about 15 days after the monsoon has broken over the Western Ghats.

I have an interesting anecdote to narrate about the monsoon bird. One very hot and sultry June afternoon I was at a meeting convened by the Director General of All India Radio where I happened to be employed at the time. The D.G.'s briefing went on and on till I was forced to switch off my hearing faculties. All at once I heard a wailing call. My ears pricked up and I went to the window to make sure I had heard right. The D.G. was upset at my inattentiveness and remarked in an acid tone, "Mr Singh has obviously found something more interesting than listening to me." Without thinking, I replied,: "Yes, I have. I've just heard the monsoon bird. It will rain tomorrow." Everyone burst out laughing. My prestige was at stake. Fortunately for me, the next morning the monsoon broke over Delhi.

Five

Life, and Other Laughing Matters

"The curse of India", says the veteran Indian cartoonist Shankar Pillai "is its lack of humour". He had to close down the *Shankar's Weekly* because there were not enough buyers. The same fate met *Diwana* after a desperate attempt to get people to laugh. "How can anyone who knows of old age, disease and death, laugh?" asked the Buddha. "How can there be mirth or laughter when the world is on fire?" he repeated. To laugh and to joke might appear to be frivolous, a dangerous attitude in a hungry land. Nevertheless, Indians have laughed at their gods, goddesses and gurus as no other people of the world have. We have laughed at our rulers, ministers, teachers and just about everything else. To the ancient Indian satirist nothing was beyond the pale of laughter. We had our Birbals, Tenali Ramalingas and Gopal Bhats. We have always had jokes based on castes and professions. And we have some of the world's best cartoonists in R.K. Laxman, Abu Abraham, Rajinder Puri, Sudhir Dar, and O.V Vijayan.

Few Indians are aware of their country's light classic literature other than the *Panchatantra, Hitopadesa* and *Kathasaritsagar*. For the first time an American Sanskritist, Lee Siegel of Hawaii University, has brought to English readers our rich heritage of wit, comedy, satire and bawdy jokes. This article is based on his *Laughing Matters : Comic Tradition in India* recently published by the Chicago University Press.

Sri Ganeshay Namah!

We begin every venture by first paying salutations to Ganpati. The elephant-headed God was quite a joker. Both he and his brother, Kumar, were in love with a fair damsel named Buddhi. They agreed to settle their claims over her by running against each other. At the given signal, Kumar flew like the wind to encircle the globe. Ganpati stayed where he was, flirting with Buddhi. All he did was to circumambulate round his parents, Siva and Parvati. When Kumar returned, breathless from his running, he was furious. A learned Brahmin was appointed judge. "My father and mother are all the world to me," said the wily Ganpati, "and I went round them faster than Kumar." Since he was the fountainhead of all knowledge, he was able to describe every place on the earth. He was declared the winner. He and Buddhi began to laugh. The Brahmin judge joined them. So infectious was their laughter that Kumar's anger also dissolved.

Early humour was not subtle. Dramatist Bhata (4th century A.D) has his character mourning the loss of a box of sweets. To make sure he hasn't eaten them, he belches to see if it has the fragrance of candy. It stinks "like the ass hole of an old pig", he finds.

According to Bhartrihari (7th century A.D) Kama, the god of sexual desire, reduced the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva to being no more than "servants attending to the chamberpots of doe-eyed ladies." Shiva, the great ascetic,

Gandhi Memorial Colle.
SRINAGAR
Acc. No: 1152
Dated: 1.9.93

was often portrayed as a lusty god satiating his thirst in bordellos.

Amaru (7th century A.D.) was more subtle:

Seeing his ladies on a sofa
(Not just one but two)
The rogue crept up behind them
(he knew just what to do)
One lady's eyes he covered up
(as if to play "Guess who")
He turned to kiss the other one
(who blushed a merry hue)
But she held back her laughter
(and the other never knew)

Sexual comedy was Amaru's forte. In another poem he presents a dialogue between two women:

Why is your face all covered with sweat?
The heat of the sun posed quite a threat
But your eyes are wet; why are they red?
The words of your lover filled me with dread.
But your hair is dishevelled; why such a mess?
The wind was blowing; no need for distress.
Your makeup is gone, rubbed all away!
Yes, rubbed off by the shawl I was wearing today.
But your breathing is heavy; why are you tired?
From working so hard, doing what you desired.
Very clever my friend, you've not made a slip.
So tell me what rhymes with the bite on your lip!

Physical deformities like a hunch back or obesity were stock objects of Sanskrit comedy.

Krishna remained the great favourite of Sanskrit writers as a prankster and a lover. He did not spare the gopis of Vrindavan; the poets did not spare him. In *Gitagovinda* of Jayadeva (12th century A.D.) he wears a yellow dress to go to his tryst with Radha wearing blue. They emerge from their love-making, he wearing blue, Radha wearing yellow. Transvestites (men wearing women's clothes) were common characters. Some, in their feminine enthusiasm, were depicted as menstruating.

Satire was the Sanskritist's favourite literary form. In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* a Vedic sacrifice is described in the following words:

> "Woman is a fire, Gautama; the phallus is the fuel; the hairs are the smoke; the vagina the flame; penetration the coal; orgasm the sparks. In the fire the gods offer semen and from it a person comes to be."

Vedic simile is made comic. In a ribald farce a royal minister of religious affairs enters a bordello where the king is holding his cabinet meeting. He sees a young prostitute:

> The hot passion of the lovely girl with deer-like eyes
> Is the lustral flame in the Vedic altar, her thighs,
> In the firehold where are joined, her luscious yoni
> And her breasts are the fruit of offering up in front
> And I'll be the sacrificial priest with stirring stick
> For churning a semen oblation – it's my ladle.
> Who'd neglect an eternal sacrifice to Love like this?
> Its sacred reward comes at once and is, we know, such bliss!

Our ancients enumerated six degrees of laughter beginning with a smile or a snigger (*smita*), to a broad beaming smile (*hasita*), on to *vishasita* (laughter), *upahasita* (hearty laughter), *apahasita* (roaring laughter) and *atihasita*– convulsive, hysterical laughter which brings tears to one's eyes. Everyone save the Buddha laughed. But even he, in one of his previous incarnations as the laughterless prince, had to learn to laugh. His father arranged a seven day festival and said to his subjects:

> "My son the prince has never, not in his entire life, laughed. The celebration will end only when he has done so. The world, it seems, cannot be renounced until it has been enjoyed. There can be no deliverance until there has been laughter."

Ultimately, a mime succeeded in evoking a smile and a gentle laugh from the Prince. He was then declared fit to marry a princess and rule his kingdom. To understand his people he had learnt to share their sorrows as well as their laughter.

There is something in the Indian temperament which makes us categorise and enumerate just about everything—the varieties of kisses, sexual positions, food, breaking wind etc. These were usually expressed in short, pithy aphorisms. *Kathasaritsagara* is full of them. A King, cuckolded by his consort, asks his *Pandit* the cause of the Queen's mirth. He replies by enumerating seven things which are heard but not seen: "Cleanliness in a crow, honesty in a gambler, patience in a snake, sexual satiation in women, potency in a eunuch, wisdom in a drunkard, friendship in a King."

In the ancients dictionary of humour there was no such word as obscenity: some of the most biting jokes are bawdy. They revelled in giving obscene names to people. The chief guard of the royal harem was *Pracandasepha*–one with a prodigous penis; a weak-faced man was described as resembling the female genital organ—*Vyanjanamukha or Yonimanjari*. Obscene language was not considered improper by the Bengali sage, Sri Ramakrishna, who took on one of his disciples in a match of dirty words. The disciple had to admit defeat: "In this too you are my guru," he conceded.

The *Jataka* tales have quite a few risque anecdotes. One tells of a naive young *Bhikku* who, seeing a woman naked for the first time, asks her what happened to her penis. "A bear knocked it off leaving a painful wound," she replied, "You kiss it and it will heal." (*Nalini Jataka*)

Satire was not always unkind. Some, dealing with the love-theme, combined wit with self-regret.

She's the one who's young, so why am I so shy?
She's the one who ought to be afraid, not I
She's the one who bears the burden of her breast
So why do I feel I have to take a rest?
Her bottom should be a burden for her to bear,

And yet I can hardly move from here to there,
It's really quite amazing, the way that love assaults.
Making me suffer her charms as if they were my faults.

Amarusataka has a poem about estranged lovers breaking the ice.

Lying upon the bed
each looked away from the other
silent suffering
each in the heart wanted to make up
and yet they stayed
sullen, proud, protecting honour
and then...
glances mingled as each looked
at the other
from the corners of their eyes
the lovers quarrel
crumbled with a sudden laughter...

The male organ was often the victim of a satirist's pen.

> "The penis is a consummately comic organ in satires of manners," writes Siegel. "Lovers fail to make it rise; holy men fail to keep it down. It is comically unruly, always refusing, to the delight of the satirist, to obey command, demand or reason... the penis is always honest."

Cunning and trickery are also topics of satirical epigrams. They are sources of power, wrote Ksemendra. "As a merchant is ruined by generosity, a guru by humility, and a government controller by compassion, so a harlot is ruined by truthfulness."

The ageing harlot is a tragi-comic figure. "No one has any more use for an old whore than they do for an icebox in winter, a row of burning lamps at noon, or a corsage that's worn and wasted."

Illicit love was rarely censured. Lord Krishna is said to have had 16,000 wives and was yet not regarded as unfaithful to any of them. Sexual prowess, which is a vice for the common man, becomes a manly virtue with the divine cowherd. Siegel writes, "Illicit love is erotic, cuckoldry is funny. Jealous women are sympathetic and lovely, jealous men are pathetic and comically idiotic."

It was assumed that all women are lascivious and it was therefore a husband's responsibility to keep her faithful. Vidura, in the *Mahabharata* pointed out, "Thieves flourish on the heedless, physicians on the infirm, women on the lustful, priests on the religious, kings on the litigant and wise men on the foolish."

Love is for the young and lusty; it becomes pathetic and funny with the aged. "The Dirty Old Man," says the *Hitopdesa* "can neither enjoy the pleasures of love nor give them up. He is like a toothless dog that can only lick the bone." Young women did not worry over passes made at them by old men who, though rich, were paupers when it came to potency.

Children's comments on serious topics, being unmotivated, are often telling and hilarious. Writes Siegel: "The masses always admire the king's new clothes; it takes a child to laugh at his nakedness. A child's laughter is at once innocent and wordly wise, sanguine and cynical, constructive and destructive."

Satirists often used childish remarks to chastise their rulers. Gopinath Chakravartin (16th Century A.D.) wrote a scathing satire on King Kalivatsala (friend of the age of dullness) and ruler of Dharmanasa where vice had been made into virtue. "The only truth that is spoken in his kingdom is uttered by the dumb; the only people who daily preserve virtue are the children of the barren."

Farces, usually enacted during Holi, lampooned rulers with contrived names like *Anayasindhu* (Ocean of Misrule) and *Vyaajastuti* (surrounded by flatterers adept in the art of deceptive praise). "The poet flatters his royal patron just as the whore flatters her customers. Flattery is lucrative". In such a state, corruption becomes endemic, "Only the shapes of its *avtaars* change. And its nameless victims remain the same from time to time and across nations. Corrupt rulers of the land feed on the poor, are parasites on the very creatures they deem parasitical, and impede progress in the name of progress."

Since the bureaucracy of the times was largely dominated by Kayasthas, the community came in for some very cruel taunts. Defecatory jokes were coined about people in authority. Bemedalled Generals vaunting martial pride when confronted by danger shat in their pants. To Tenali Rama is ascribed the anecdote of boasting of having cut off the legs of the commander-in-chief of the enemy army. When asked why he hadn't cut off the man's head, Tenali Rama replied, "Someone else had already done that."

Doctors did not command much respect with our ancients. They were given a variety of unflattering names – *Vyadhivardhaka* (increase of disease), *Vyadhisindhu* (illness Ocean), and *Aturantaka* (killer of-the-sick). The famous physician Caraka was mercilessly parodied in verse:

Haven't you heard of this doctor's manifold skills,
Of all of the patients he so expertly kills
With his treatment, his medicine, his panaceas?
In case of bad bowels and for all diarrhoeas
He pierces the eye with a needle – it's hot! O it glows!
He'll shove a sharp hook way up your nose
If pissing is painful, if you've got a stone,
Elephantiasised feet are cut to the bone.
He pours boiling oil as a salve when it smarts;
Or if there's trouble with his patients' hearts
He uses a vise to squeeze out their balls.
Inhalation of corn smoke is his cure for rales.
A fast or an enema, something sweat-starting.
Is his cure for belching as well as for farting.
Eat lots of ground meat, is the doctor's suggestion
For any problems one has with one's digestion.
For treatment of phlegm he is punctilious
He prescribes water and if you're bilious,
He gives hot peppers and herbs that are spicy.

For fevers he orders a bath that is icy
Alas, with only one little mouth it's so hard for me
To enumerate all the virtues of Illness-Ocean, M.D.

"In the case of an eye-disease, a hot ploughshare should be inserted into the anus", advises the *Vaidji*, "then those afflictions coming from the eyes will be forgotten by the brain."

A doctor and the angel of death both kill, says a Jewish proverb, except that the doctor charges a fee. Ksemendra in his *Kalavilasa* shares the sentiment: "Out of a desire to perfect his art the physician has killed thousands of men with his herbal treatment – thus he has become famous." He is equally harsh on astrologers: "He is so busy calculating astrological forecasts by examining the position of the moon and the planets in the heavens, that he doesn't realize that his wife is balling every creep in town."

Although a large number of writers were Brahmins, it did not prevent them from chastising their caste for greed and gluttony. According to the *Jatakas* there are four things which can never be sated: the ocean, Kings, women and Brahmins. They are "gift-getters, soma drinkers and food gobblers." The *Chandogya Upanisad* compares them to dogs: "Just as the Vedic priests walk joined together as they chant hymns of praise... so the dogs trot along together, sit down, and bark Aum, (and they howl) Aum! Let's eat! Aum! Lets drink! Aum! Let the gods Varuna, Prajapati and Savitri feed us! Lord of food, bring our food! Bring it here! Aum!"

The fat Brahmin, because of his obsession with food, was often portrayed as a poor lover cuckolded by his wife. And often ignorant, like the Brahmin who boasted of knowing six Vedas when in fact there were only four. Likewise *Sadhus*, *Yogis* and *Tantriks* were mocked for their venality.

The image of a rotund, sweet-meat, loving Brahmin endures to this day: *'pahley peyt pooja, phir kaam dooja'* —first worship the belly, then think of other things.

In the Vedic period, the monkey often personified lust without sense of propriety; he was both a prankster and a champion of sex. His metamorphosis as a warrior god of wrestlers and devoted servant of Shri Rama came with Hanuman in the Puranic period.

The legends attached to Sri Krishna were also creations of the Puranic age.

Siegel writes:

> "He is born as a plump little baby in a cowherd village. And it is funny that as a child he is a liar and thief, and that as a young man he spends his time seducing the girls of that village and making cuckolds of the men. Such a god was well-suited to humorous depiction. The adulterous nature of his trysting with the milkmaids of Vraja provided ample opportunity for dirty jokes and an abundant source of a religious humour that was thoroughly naughty but in no way blasphemous."

> "Krishna, the drinker of milk, giggles; Shiva the drinker of poison, roars. The devotee laughs warmly, the yogi wildly, the villager heartily, the poet wittily. Laughter, no less than tears, links heaven and earth."

Our ancients held nothing sacred:

Lakshmi sleeps on a lotus;
Siva sleeps on the Himalayas;
Vishnu sleeps on the Milky Ocean-
The gods must be afraid of bedbugs!

Gurus or teachers fare little better:

Though controlling breath, that vital part,
And expounding scriptures learned by heart,
Gurus die—their souls must part–
Just like the passing of a fart!

(Subhasitavali)

The last laugh is the prerogative of death:

Wealth laughs
at those who make of money an obsession;
Earth laughs

at those who say "this land is my possession!"
  Illicit lovers laugh
at the guy who thinks his kids are kids he's made;
  And Death laughs
at the king who on battlefield is afraid.

(Bhartrihari)

"Jokes, passed on for pleasure in social intercourse, travel round the world like venereal disease" writes Lee Siegel.

Today's Indian humour, like Aids, is largely an adaptation of Western jokes. There was this one of a Texan who found himself sitting next to a Sardarji in the plane:

'What are you?' the Texan drawled, 'I am Sikh', the Indian replied. 'I am sorry to hear that. I hope you feel better soon.'

'No, no, sir, I am not sick as of body, I am Sikh of religion.' The Texan slapped his back, 'I'm kinda sick of religion myself!'

That's what you call a sick joke.

Six

Of Life Hereafter, Ghosts and Talking to the Dead

Belief in ghosts and communication with the dead are still regarded as symptoms of feeble-mindedness. Rational people dismiss occult phenomenon because none can stand scientific scrutiny. At the same time, it is evident that while there are many things which an average person cannot comprehend with his senses, animals are able to do with theirs. Also, there are persons gifted with a vision of the future, the power to heal the sick without medicines and communicate with each other through telepathy. The literature on the occult is truly formidable. This article is based on Colin Wilson's *The Occult* (May Flower).

A few days after I joined college in England, I met an Indian couple who had taken a room in the boarding house in which I was staying. They were from Maharashtra, and if my memory serves me right, went under the name of

Professor and Mrs Shastri. I don't remember what he was professor of but vividly recall a week-end I spent in their company. They had come to attend a Spiritualists Conference in London where they were to share their occult experiences with fellow believers. Professor Shastri showed me a photograph of himself with his wife seated on chairs, and a woman standing behind them. He explained that the photograph had been taken recently in Bombay. The lady on the chair beside him was his second wife; the lady standing behind them was his first wife who had died some years before the photograph was taken. To vouch for its authenticity, the photograph bore the signature of the photographer and the date on which it was taken.

I was sceptical. Even in those days it was possible to superimpose one picture on another. Nor was I impressed with the seances the Shastris took me to. They were largely attended by elderly women. A medium went into a trance and gave strange messages in a voice not its own.

Back home in India I exposed myself willingly to occult phenomenon. In the home of the film star Leena Chandavarkar I watched an *aarti* at which oil lamps placed on the altar began to pirouette their way towards Leena's mother. I saw Dadaji 'materialise' a watch from the air and change the print on the dial from "Citizen Made in Japan" to "Given by Dadaji to Kushwant Singh" (My name was mis-spelt). I still have the watch as also a porcelain bottle of Scotch with the legend "Made in the Universe. Presented by Dadaji to K. Singh." Sai Baba is known to "materialise" rings and medallions bearing his image and produce *vibhuti* (sacred ash) by rubbing his palms. (Some magicians can do the same). I met an attractive young widow of a foreign service officer, who does not wish to be identified, who told me that she was able to communicate with her husband who was killed in a car accident four years ago.

Those of us who have a healthy distrust of the occult should read Colin Wilson. I was very impressed by his first book *The Outsider* (1956). Since then he has published over thirty. The most successful and readable is *The Occult* which is a comprehensive compilation of all that is known about spirits, planchets, poltergeists, witches and men and women gifted with powers of healing and forecasting the future. Since the number of charlatans in the trade have always outnumbered the genuinely gifted, Wilson exposes them with merciless enthusiasm just as he unreservedly praises those whose uncanny gifts of prophecy were truly mind-boggling.

His main theme is that human beings tend to remain "trapped in the triviality of everydayness" and the "suffocating world of their personal pre-occupations." Longing for occult is the instinctive desire to believe in unseen forces (known as *huaca* to the Peruvian Indians). He writes, "Our scientists have tried to measure life with a six inch ruler and weigh it with kitchen scales". The scientist is, according to him, "nothing more than a glorified accident investigator." Colin's conversion to belief in the occult came after one incident. While he was feverishly searching for a piece of information, a book fell off his shelf and opened at the page which had what he was looking for. It could have been a coincidence but the chances of such a coincidence could not be more than one in a million. It could also have been an act of will on the part of Wilson. Or yet, the doing of an invisible helping hand.

Wilson maintains that "intellect has reached certain limits and cannot advance beyond them until it recovers some of the lost powers"; a kind of intellectual far-sightedness that could endow a person with the power of a pair of binoculars to see into the distant future. There is little doubt that other forms of life have faculties absent in human beings. There are varieties of fish which find their way across the ocean to their spawning grounds and birds which traverse thousands of miles every year to reach nesting places. Likewise there are some humans who possess powers which others do not have. Water-diviners can sense the presence of underground wells with the aid of a Y shaped twig. A person may suddenly develop such powers. He cites the case of a Dutchman, Peter Hurkos, who in 1943 fell off a ladder and fractured his skull. When he woke up in hospital he found he could foresee future events. He recognised a fellow patient who came to say goodbye to him as a British agent who would be shot in two days. He faced a firing squad 48 hours later.

About the only activity that raises common mortals to mystic heights, Wilson maintains, is fulfilling sexual intercourse. He quotes Lady Chatterley's emotions after she had been made love to by her game keeper: "As she ran home in the twilight the world seemed a dream; the trees in the park seemed bulging and surging at anchor on a tide and the heave of the slope to the house was alive." Wilson believed in the liberating quality of sex: "The penis is the rod that connects man to Mars". He exhorts people to develop powers latent in them which he calls "Faculty X."

The poet Robert Graves was of the opinion that one in every twenty i.e. five per cent of the population possesses latent occult powers which lie dormant till they are activated. And they cannot be activated unless a person first acquires "an inner stillness" which in its turn requires concentration. This appears to be much the same exercise as meditation to achieve stillness of the mind preparatory to rousing one's *kundalini* (serpent power) which both heightens sensitivity as well as evokes ecstasy.

In the process of civilising ourselves we have taken to living in noisy, congested cities and have lost the supersensory instincts which our primitives possessed e.g. sensing danger and the intuitive knowledge which guided shepherds to green pastures. One that has often emerged in humans even after they lost others was the gift of prophecy. In 1923 we had the example of a man of Dayton named Cayce who awoke from a trance and made accurate predictions of events that would occur between 1958-1998. These included the Wall Street crash, death of President Roosevelt, the assassination of President Kennedy and the end of World War II. According to Cayce, 1997 will see the end of life on our planet.

In his book *The Strange World of Astrologers*, Ellie Howe points out how some astrologers can be uncannily accurate about the future, while others, working on the same material (time and place of birth) can be woefully inaccurate. We have the example of Krafft who on November 2, 1939 warned Nazi intelligence in writing that an attempt on the life of Hitler would be made in the course of the following week. He was proved right. But that did not save him from the Hitlerian purge of astrologers.

The most famous name in astrology is that of Nostradamus. He was born in 1503 of French Christian-Jewish parents. Astrology was practiced by his ancestors. He learnt many European languages and spent most of his youth travelling over the continent. It was after his wife and two children succumbed to the plague that he developed powers of prophecy. In Italy he prostrated himself before a swineherd and hailed him as "His Holiness". The swineherd became Pope Sixtus V. In 1547, Nostradamus settled down in Salon (France) with his second wife and practiced medicine and astrology for 19 years before he died. It was in 1555 that he published his prophecies in the forms of poetic stanzas. To the sceptic (like me) they read like the vague generalisations of the kind we read in "What the Stars Foretell" columns of our papers. Believers find them precise and accurate. According to them he prophecied the French Revolution, the execution of the King and Queen, the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte as well as deaths of other kings, queens and Popes. Nostradamus gives us two years more of existence than Cayce:

Like the great King of Angolmois
The Year 1999, Seventh month
The great King of terror will descend from the sky
At the time, Mars will reign for the good cause.

Angolmois is an anagram of Mongolians. This may mean an invasion from outer space or a holocaust triggered off by some yellow race.

Another well-known name in the astrologers' hagiography is that of Emanuel Swedenborg who was an engineer, scientist and astronomer. He was also obsessed with sex. On July 19, 1759 while in Gothenberg, he "saw" fire break out 300 miles away in Stockholm which was put out three houses away from his home.

One more name to conjure with is that of the Swiss Franz Anton Mesmer (B. 1734) after whom we have the word mesmerism. He could mesmerize or hypnotise people and make them obey his commands. He also used magnets to cure diseases and sold jars of magnetised water as medicine. His fall came when he tried to restore sight to a blind girl pianist in Vienna. While treating young women, Mesmer's hands often strayed to their bosoms and thighs. When that happened to the blind girl, she complained to her patron who happened to be none other than the Queen Empress of Austria. Mesmer had to flee from Vienna. Undeterred, he set up practice in Paris where he cured many frustrated women by having them made love to in his "crisis room" till "magnetic fluid" flowed in their orgasms. He lived to be 80.

Another celebrated name is that of Casanova (B. 1725) an Abbe turned diviner and healer. While trying to locate a treasure, Casanova acquired the services of a 14 year old virgin. Wilson writes, "He bathed her himself and she responded to his caresses, until her ardent fire was at last quenched by the natural result of that excitement. On drying her, Casanova came close to destroying the virginity that was essential to his magic, but fortunately his own excitement also reached a harmless climax." The experiment was repeated many times but no treasure was found. Casanova lived to be 73 before he died in London.

Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of the occult is the mysterious power of healing (thaumaturgy) that some people have. Jesus was essentially a *maseehah* (healer). This power is much more than a pleasant bed-side manner; it is some kind of transference of energy which helps the victim to fight off his disease. Amongst the most famous healers was Rasputin, a Siberian peasant who became a notorious figure in the court at St. Petersburg.

Rasputin wanted to become a monk but his wild nature and love for liquor and women cut short his career in a monastery. He married a woman four years older than himself and had a son who died in infancy. After a visit to Greece he returned to Russia and religion and set up his own chapel. His fiery sermons attracted large numbers of peasants. He discovered that by simply praying at the bedsides of sick people, he was able to cure them. In 1905, when he was 30, he moved to St. Petersburg. His opportunity came when he was sent for by the Tsarina to cure her ailing son, the only one she had, of bleeding to death by haemophilia. As Rasputin went to the prince's bedside and started to pray, the bleeding stopped. He performed the miracle on three occasions and understandably became a great favourite of the Empress. Inevitably he also came to be hated by many courtiers notably a homo-sexual, Prince Yussopov. On the night of December 29, 1916 Yussopov invited him home and fed him cakes injected with cyanide, which would have killed any man instantly. They had no effect on Rasputin. Then Yussopov shot him and left him for dead. But as he came back with his friends to pick up the body, Rasputin jumped up and burst through a locked door. He was shot again and clubbed with iron bars. Yussopov and his friends finally bored a hole in the frozen river and dumped Rasputin's body into it. The post mortem revealed no trace of cyanide in the body. Rasputin's death had not been caused by pistol shots or a battered head but by drowning.

Rasputin has been much maligned by historians as a drunkard and a debauch. They have not given him credit for his occult powers. Apart from healing, his prophecies, including the end of monarchy in Russia proved to be correct.

Another Russian who earned a great reputation in the occult world was Gurdjieff (B. 1873). Colin sums up his teaching in a few words:

"From birth until the age of twenty-one, we grow physically and in every other sense. Changes take place inside us without our volition. Then it stops. We are so used to the changes taking place 'automatically' that we find it difficult to stop expecting automatic growth to continue. It doesn't, and most people slowly ossify. If growth is to continue, unusual efforts must be made in order to stimulate the robot into providing newness."

Gurdjieff travelled widely over Europe and Asia in the first forty years of his life. Shortly before World War I he met another remarkable man, Ouspensky. They evolved their own philosophies and several Gurdjieff centres were established to propagate their ideas.

Gurdjieff became quite a cult figure in the well-to-do upper classes. He was always immaculately dressed and a great showman. He could make objects and humans fly in space and have telepathic communication. He believed that everyone who tried earnestly enough could cultivate such powers. "If we live calm, monotonous days and peaceful nights, we stultify. We had better torture our own spirits than suffer the inanities of calm," he said to a friend.

For some years Gurdjieff and Ouspensky worked in close collaboration. But when the Revolution forced Gurdjieff to leave Russia for London where Ouspensky had established a centre, they clashed. Gurdjieff believed in good living—brandy, cigars and young girls. When his wife died, he took a mistress and sired children through his female pupils. He could make women have orgasms by simply looking at them with his lecherous eyes. By the time he died of his excesses he had acquired a sizeable following all over the world.

Communication with the dead has been practiced over the ages. At one time planchets (three legged stools on wheels with a fixed pencil) were used to take down messages from the dead. More popular were mediums who went into a trance and were possessed by spirits of dead people. The most famous exponent of this form of communication was Daniel Douglas Home (B. 1833). He began to have visions at the age of thirteen when he was able to foresee deaths of people. In 1851, at Harvard, he demonstrated before an audience his power to make lights dim and brighten up by simply staring at the bulbs. At another demonstration, he made instruments of an orchestra play on their own. He exhibited his powers in different cities of Europe. In 1871, Home was investigated by a reputed scientist in London. The report was favourable to Home. He died in 1886 at the age of 53.

Bishop Pike, in his book *The Other Side*, narrates his own experiences of communicating with his dead son who shot himself in 1966. After some strange occurrences in his room, the Bishop received a clear message: "I failed the test, I can't face you, can't face up. I'm confused. Very sudden passing ……God, I didn't know what I was doing. But when I got here I found I wasn't such a failure as I thought." Bishop Pike's end was equally mysterious. Three years after his son's death, he and his second wife lost their way in a desert in Israel. He was too exhausted to walk any further; his wife found her way back to a settlement. It was through a medium in London that the Bishop was able to communicate and tell his wife where his body was to be found.

Many eminent men of letters were convinced of some sort of continuation after death. Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes) in his book *The Vital Message* wrote of the soul as a complete duplicate of the body and its transition to a higher mystical plane after death. Swedenborg went further and maintained that "spirits progress and evolve just as they do on earth."

Amongst other occult phenomenon, Wilson records the case of an alcoholic bellhop, Ted Serios, who could cause pictures to appear on a film by merely gazing at the lens of a camera. He was able to transfer a picture he had seen on a raw film even without a camera.

Belief in previous births is by no means an Indian monopoly. Egyptians, Greeks and Romans have also written about reincarnation. Memories of earlier births apparently surface between the ages of two and four, then begin to fade out. There was the celebrated case of Shanti Devi born in Delhi in 1926 who recollected her previous life as a housewife in Mathura where she recognised several landmarks as well as her previous husband. Then there was the case of Ram Shaikar born in 1951 who recalled details of his murder at the age of six as a sacrifice to the gods. Understandably, the number of cases of memories of previous lives come more from India where belief in rebirth is deeply entrenched, than from other countries.

Colin Wilson sums up his study of occult phenomenon with the following words:

"It is certain that human beings possess latent powers of which they are only dimly aware, and that these latent powers produce a variety of phenomenon, from poltergeist activity to 'thought photography' and spontaneous combustion. These 'positive' powers are connected to, but not identical with, the power of precognition and of 'sensing' ghosts."

Seven

Scholar Extraordinary: Nirad C. Chaudhuri

On November 23rd 1988, Nirad Chaudhuri was 90. For over fifteen years he has lived in Oxford where he evidently intends to stay till the end—as did the man after whom he patterned his life, Max Mueller. His biography of Max Mueller is sub-titled *Scholar Extraordinary*.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri has good reasons to stay away from India. For some years he was persecuted by the government; then he received only grudging recognition for his scholarship. There were a handful of people (amongst whom I am privileged to count myself) who stood by him in his dark days and gave him the homage due to a man of genius. For a genius he certainly is. He is gifted with a phenomenal memory. His knowledge of just about everything worth knowing is encyclopaedic. His analysis of historical events is dispassionate and at times cruelly objective. No.Indian has to this day handled the English language with greater skill; whatever he says is said with felicity and a witty turn of phrase. He is the most quotable of Indian authors.

After *The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian* came several equally provocative and thought provoking books—*A Passage to England, The Intellectual in India, To Live or Not to Live, Clive of India, The Continent of Circe* and *Hinduism*. Perhaps the only work which did not rouse controversy was his biography of Max Mueller. Even smaller works like *Culture in the Vanity Bag* succeeded in raising a storm of criticism. Nirad Babu has just completed the second volume of his autobiography. It should be the great literary event of 1988.

In 1951 when *The Autobiography of An Unknown Indian* was first published in England, not many people had heard the name of Nirad C. Chaudhuri: he was right in describing himself as unknown. He was at the time working as a script-writer in the external services of All India Radio, on a measly salary of Rs 1,000 per month. As reports of reviews of his book in English journals describing it as a literary *tour de force* began to appear in Indian papers, people became curious to know who this man was. That was the first time Colonel Lakshmanan, then Director General of AIR heard that the author was working in Broadcasting House. The story of his success spread and reached the ears of B.V.Keskar, Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, a man with pretensions to learning, who wore his patriotism on the sleeves of his khadi kurta. He learnt that the autobiography had a dedication praising the British Raj. Without bothering to read the book, Keskar, anxious to be elevated to Cabinet rank, announced that the book would be banned and had Chaudhuri served with a notice demanding an explanation prior to termination of service. Nirad treated Keskar's notice with unconcealed contempt. The dedication read as follows:

To the Memory of the
British Empire in India
Which conferred

Subjecthood on us
But withheld citizenship;
To which yet
everyone of us threw out
The Challenge:
"Civis Britannicus Sum"
Because
All that was good and living
Within us
Was made, shaped, and
quickened
By the same British Rule

The book was not banned but Nirad lost his job. A blanket order was issued to all publicity departments of the government forbidding them from accepting articles by Nirad. National newspapers and magazines which earned a substantial portion of their revenue from government advertising took the hint and followed suit. Thus, with one stroke of his pen, a minister deprived this man of his only means of livelihood. He had a wife, three sons and a nephew to house, feed, clothe and educate. The only people who realised the tragic irony of Nirad's situation were those who had read his autobiography beyond its dedication. It was the height of folly to describe it as pro or anti British or Indian. What was more, it was not even an autobiography in the orthodox sense of the term because there was little that the author revealed of himself or his family and more of the times of which he wrote. It was in fact a refreshingly original reinterpretation of contemporary India—what it had derived from its past with uncannily accurate predictions of its future.

Nirad was one of a family of eight children of a lawyer practising in Kishorganj, now in Bangladesh. The Chaudhuris were Kayasthas from village Banagram and looked up to as respectable, moderately prosperous *bhadralog*.

In the preface to the autobiography, he assures readers that he's written "with the utmost honesty and accuracy" because "a man persuades himself best; and best convinces others, by means of his own experience". And adds, "I want a declaration of faith for myself".

His earlier chapters, which are about his birthplace, his ancestral and mother's villages, his perceptions of England, his parents, his early years, are largely descriptive and extraordinarily well-written. He really comes into his own describing the Indian renaissance in Bengal from the emergence of the *Brahmo Samaj* to the turn of the century with the writings of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt and her sister, Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Rabindra Nath Tagore. He regrets that this renaissance, which was quickened by the impact of Christianity, remained impervious to Islamic influences. However, orthodox Hindus felt threatened by the winds of change.

> "Hinduism has an uncanny sense of what threatens it. No plausible assurances, no euphemism, no disguise can put its ever-alert instinct of self-preservation off its guard. No direct approach can take it by surprise. Therefore, during British rule, Hinduism has fought tooth and nail even those measures of reform which a non-Hindu would consider as purely humanitarian, such as the abolition of infanticide and the burning of widows, the raising of the age of consent, the marriage of widows, and intercaste marriages. This being so, it was inconceivable that such a challenge to Hindu polytheism as Rammohun Roy was throwing out would go unanswered, or that the Hindu Argus would be disarmed in its suspicion by the plea that all that the reformers were preaching was warranted by the highest revealed scriptures of the Hindus".

The threat was met by a counter reformation.

> "Towards the end of the century the Hindu counter reformation swung to the opposite pole of grotesqueness. From late Sanskrit scholasticism it passed to scientific claptrap. Every Hindu custom and every Hindu taboo

found its justification in some theory of electricity and magnetism. At times even the science of bacteriology, new at the time, was invoked. It was proclaimed that if a Hindu kept a pigtail, it was only as an electromagnetic coil; if he bathed in the Ganges it was because an unspecified European (for preference, German) scientist had demonstrated that Ganges water killed bacteria instantaneously; if he fasted at full and new moon, it was only to counteract the gravitational forces of the sun and the moon; the Diwali illumination was supposed to be a collective lighting of fire for burning up the poisonous gases given off by the earth on that evening. In the end our good old legends and myths seemed like taking to their heels before the invasion of farads, ohms and amperes, protozoa and amoebae, and ethane, methane and other gases. In this instance, again, the most astounding thing was not that these antics should have made their appearance but that they should have been taken so literally and seriously as they were. Even so great an intellect as Bankim Chandra Chatterji was not wholly immune from the infection. Very discreet indications of his flirtation with the old dame trying to pass off as a mondaine are occasionally to be found in his writings. But he never resorted to this buffoonery in his explicit reinterpretation of Hinduism."

The partition of Bengal in 1905 struck the match which ignited Hindu Bengal, leaving Muslims out in the cold. Nirad writes:

"I can throw a collateral beam on the character of our nationalism by describing what we felt about the Muslims. When I see the gigantic catastrophe of Hindu-Muslim discord of these days, I am not surprised, because we as children held the tiny mustard seed in our hands and sowed it very diligently. In fact, this conflict was implicit in the very unfolding of our history, and could hardly be avoided. Heaven preserve me from the dishonesty, so general amongst Indians, of attributing this conflict to

British rule, however much the foreign rulers might have profited by it. Indeed they would have been excusable only as gods, and not as man the political animal, had they made no use of the weapon so assiduously manufactured by us, and by us also put into their hands. But even then they did not make use of it to the extent they might easily have done. This, I know, is a very controversial thesis, but I think it can be easily proved if we do not turn a blind eye to the facts of our history."

"Hatred of the Muslim was the hatred of the Muslim in history," writes Chaudhuri. "When the Muslims were invited to join the Congress on its very inception their leaders very politely but firmly declined, and one of them said shrewdly that the Muslims, "tied to the wheels of the judgement of majority, would be in the end crushed out of all semblance of nationality." The so-called two-nation theory was formulated long before Mr Jinnah or the Muslim League. In truth it was not a theory at all, it was a fact of history."

Muslims, who formed the preponderant majority of the population of East Bengal, began to make life difficult for the Hindus. The Chaudhuris decided to move to Calcutta. Nirad must have been an incredibly precocious boy. At school, besides the prescribed curricula he studied military science, reading up all he could find on the latest designs of guns available in encyclopaedias and books in the National library. He discreetly put away his notes and designs of automatic weapons when World War I broke out lest he get into trouble with the police. The family's sympathies were with the Allies, those of others largely with the Germans.

Nirad topped the university in his B.A. examination: he barely refers to his scholarships besides modestly denying that he ever was one. He wanted to become a professor but lost nerve while taking his M.A. examination and abandoned plans of becoming an academic. Then followed sixteen years of "poverty, want and humiliation" as he took up clerical jobs he hated, did badly and was fired. He writes: "Hindu society does not teach its youth to face life bravely. The phrase "courage of life" is unintelligible to a Hindu, who accepts the first wail of birth as the leitmotiv of existence and manages quite successfully to lead a mock-turtle's life during the whole of it. When I was young I had my share of reading of the didactic poems which warned us that the day of reckoning for all our childish joys and laughter was at hand. We saw the elders, both men and women, sitting head in hand, contemplating not only their own woes, which they thought were present, but also the woes of their children which they anticipated. Old Hinduism sat smoking his hookah all the while, ready to swallow the world in a bored yawn, and as if he, the greatest Old man of the Sea any voyager through life can ever encounter, was not enough by himself, he had at his side the nightmare of middle-class unemployment. All of us were led inexorably to believe that only some extraordinary and unpredictable stroke of luck could secure for us, not good employment but even a meagre livelihood."

His contempt for his countrymen deepened. This is how he dismissed Indian nationalist fervour:

> "What are all the teeth with which his love for his country bites an Indian? His answer, were he capable of giving one, would contain no suggestion of the mystical realisation of charity and love revealed in Dante's answer. It would describe no ascent from the plane of perverse or mundane love to the plane of just or divine love, but disclose a descent from the level even of wordly love to the underworld of hate. The teeth with which the love of his country bites the Indian are not the teeth of any human being, nor of any other mammal: not even of that fear-inspiring antediluvian feline—the sabre-toothed tiger, for no creature which has ever sucked the warm milk of its mother's breast can have teeth of such cold and petrified ferocity. They are the teeth of reptiles: the venom-injecting fangs of the krait, the low-lying and insidious cousin of

the comparatively decent cobra."

The post-autobiographical period brought out the best and the worst in Nirad C. Chaudhuri. His second book, *A Passage to England* — title being a rake off from E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*—was largely an eminently readable travelogue though lacking in the acerbic of the earlier work. He had become a celebrity but being one did not increase his bank balance. He had dark moods of despair and became edgier than before. His small circle of friends which comprised the Jhabvalas, Mehra Masani and myself made it a point to celebrate Nirad's birthday by rotation in our homes. When John Freeman became Britain's High Commissioner in New Delhi, his wife Catherine took on the annual celebration in her home. An invitation to Nirad's birthday party at King George's Avenue became the hallmark of acceptance by Delhi's literary elite. None of this made much difference to Nirad's touchiness on some subjects, chiefly the chronic shortage of cash. I, who regarded it as a privilege to be able to help him out burnt my fingers doing so. I will let Nirad narrate the episode in his own words. His preface to *The Continent of Circe* entitled "In gratitude" puts it as follows: "My thanks are due first and foremost to my friend, Khushwant Singh, the well-known Sikh writer, good companion, and man-about-town, for the loan of his portable typewriter. Though it may be said that my mind is feudal, my hands at least are of the machine age. I can write only on a typewriter, and mine was worn out. As soon as Khushwant Singh heard that my project of writing this series of works was held up because I could not immediately replace my broken machine, he lent me his own; afterwards he presented me with a brand new portable. He is also the only fellow-Indian (significantly a Sikh, and not a Hindu) who has put in good words for me in print in India. This needed courage."

But living where I live, even in feeling gratitude I cannot get away from *return indicarum natura*, one aspect of a duality in a great Zoroastrian manner, a secular conflict between

Ahriman and Ahura Mazda in which light was bound to triumph over darkness. But the duality of the Hindu existence is like the cat-and-dog life of a maladjusted married couple who can neither separate nor live together. So just when, with the near completion of one of the essays, my gratitude to Khushwant Singh was at its highest I read an account of the loan of the typewriter in public print. It was contained in an article entitled *An Interview with Khushwant Singh* by an American woman in a magazine which described itself as 'the official publication of the American Women's Club of Delhi'—and in it I read:

Interviewer: 'Who is the best Indian writer today?'

Khushwant Singh: (as reported) : 'In non-fiction? Without a doubt Nirad Chaudhuri... A bitter man, a poor man. He doesn't even own a typewriter. He borrows mine a week at a time.'

I was struck all of a heap. My poverty is, of course, well known in New Delhi and much further afield, and therefore I was not prepared to see it bruited about by so august a body as the American Women's Club of Delhi. Why did the impressive board of twelve American women who were jointly looking after the magazine think it necessary to publish such small talk about a man who was even smaller by their standards, who had neither of the two things they understood and respected namely money and official position? Was it because I was a writer? When I would only lament

Why did I write? What sin to me unknown
Dip't me in ink, my parents' or my own?

Khushwant Singh told me that he had never made the statement in the form and spirit in which it was reproduced, and that he was not even aware of the real intention of the woman he was entertaining at tea. Of course, I took his word for it. But even if in the course of a private conversation he had said all that was reported, that would not have made any difference to my affection for him. I tried to show that I bore no grudge by again borrowing the machine after the publication of the article and by most gratefully accepting the present of the new typewriter.

The conduct of the American women, however, I cannot even now understand unless I attribute it to the sad but inexorable law of the American impingement on Asia that the United States will never export any of its products to the East except those of which every decent American is ashamed, taken with its compliment that in retaliation, the East will set its lowest adventurers on the distributors of American money. The arrogance of the almsgiver is fitly matched by the impudence of the beggar.

Another true episode shows Nirad Chaudhuri in his uncompromising pugnacity. It was the bleakest period in his life and yet he displayed a kind of arrogant indifference to money of the kind I have never encountered. At the time I was editing *Yojana* for the Planning Commission. One morning I was summoned by H.M. Patel, then secretary of the Ministry of Finance for a discussion with his Minister T.T. Krishnamachari. The Minister told me that he wanted a longish tract written on the plight of Hindus fleeing from East Pakistan by a writer who was well-known in the English speaking world. Money, he assured me, was no problem. They would give him what he asked for. I told him that the best person would be Nirad Chaudhuri who, besides being the best known Indian writer abroad, was born and brought up in East Pakistan. The only difficulty was that Minister B.V. Keskar had imposed a ban on Nirad. "Who is Keskar?" scoffed T.T.K., "You can tell your friend that the ban has been removed. I want him to undertake this assignment immediately. We will give him what he wants."

I was delighted. Since Nirad did not have a phone in his house, I sent a *chaprasi* to his Nicholson Road apartment asking him to see me as soon as possible. When he came, I greeted him with the good news, "Nirad, your problems are over." I told him what had transpired between me and T.T. Krishnamachari. Nirad did not look pleased. "So the government has decided to lift its ban on me?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied enthusiastically.

"But I have not decided to lift my ban against the government," he said. And walked out of my office.

The Continent of Circe won Nirad the Duff Cooper literary award. Circe, it may be recalled, was a sorceress in Greek mythology. Anyone who drank from her cup was turned into a pig. Nirad Babu's choice of titles leaves one in no doubt of the thesis he meant to expound: India is the Sorceress; people who make it their home in the course of time, become dehumanised and turn into swine.

He starts off by asserting that foreigners and anglicised Indians have never been able to understand India or Indians. "A man who cannot endure dirt, dust, stench, noise, ugliness, disorder, heat and cold has no right to live in India," proclaims Nirad Babu. He proceeds to describe his own habitat. "I live just inside the old wall built originally by the Moghul Emperor Shah Jahan, overlooking a fine part and commanding a magnificent view of the famous Ridge, the Jamuna, and the Jama Masjid. It is probably the finest aspect to be seen anywhere in Delhi. My western friends say that it reminds them of the view of the Borghese Gardens from the Pincio. But after independence, for four years, I saw people easing themselves in this park in the morning, sitting in rows. During this time the stench was so foul that after inhaling it for a year I fell ill and came very near death. Within the city I have seen streets running with sewage water and faeces floating on it while, undisturbed by this, vendors of vegetables and other foodstuffs were selling their produce on the adjacent pavements. I have never objected to or minded all this, and I will say that if I have any living knowledge of my country it is a reward for this unflinching realism. So, when anglicised Indians come to argue with me, I expect them to possess at least a fragment of my knowledge and toleration of these conditions."

He quotes a story, *The Arabian Nights*, in which Prince Diamond wanted to go to the fabulous city of Wakak despite the deadly dangers that lay *en route*. Ultimately, armed with a magic weapon which would protect him from harm, he approached a sleeping giant, Simurg, who was to fly him to Wakak. To test Prince Diamond's ability to stand the ordeal, Simurg let out a stinking fart which lasted for over an hour, filling the atmosphere with a lethal stench. The Prince survived his ordeal because of his magic weapon and was able to visit Wakak. That is the kind of weapon people must arm themselves with if they want to get to terms with India and Indians.

The word Indian is a misnomer; it should be Hindu, meaning the people who live beyond the river Indus or Sindhu. Hinduism is not a religion: the concept of religion is alien to the people who subscribe to *Sanatana Dharma*, the eternal way. Nirad Babu divides the inhabitants into three ethnic groups: aboriginals, Mongols and those who came later—black, yellow and brown. What gave society its firm base was its caste system which remained mobile till the arrival of the Muslims. It was fossilised by the British.

British contempt for the Hindus as "degraded, perverse, untruthful, shifty and effeminate" was far off the mark. Alberuni was closer to understanding these complex people and the contradiction in their character: renunciation and avarice, chastity with sex obsessions, morbid respect for animals with beastly cruelty, great learning with unbelievable stupidity.

"Therefore", he went on to say, "the scientific theories of the Hindus were in a state of utter confusion, devoid of order, and in the last resort, always mixed up with the silly notions of the crowd". Alberuni compared their mathematics and astronomy to "a mixture of pearls and sour dates or dung", and observed "that both kinds of things were equal in their eyes because they could not raise themselves to the methods of a strictly scientific deduction."

As might have been predicted, *The Continent of Circe* did not go down well with Indians. They read it and abused Nirad in the strongest language. Nothing pleased Nirad more than being abused for the wrong reasons. He seemed to enjoy provoking people into losing their tempers. I recall one evening at the Jhabvala home when Jhab's mother was visiting them. This Parsi dowager had seen difficult days under British rule. Her husband had been a labour leader and was one of the accused in the famous Meerut conspiracy case. She was an ardent nationalist and proud of her husband's role in the freedom movement. Apropos nothing, Nirad tossed in a wounding remark: "Parsis are not Indians; no Indian looks upon them as fellow countrymen."

Mrs Jhabvala tried to keep her cool. But when Nirad repeated the remark, she exploded, "How dare you insult Parsis! When you were licking the boots of the British, Parsis like my husband were in British jails."

"That makes no difference whatsoever," answered Nirad coolly. "I don't care how many Parsis went to jail. Indians do not look upon them as Indians."

Mrs Jhabvala promptly retired to her bed room.

The trouble with Nirad was that he was always right. In my home he had a hot argument with Kingsley Martin, famous editor of *The New Statesman* and *Nation*. It was on some point of English history. Kingsley was a bad loser. When he found that he had lost the argument, he hit below the belt. "Forgive my drawing attention to your elegant dinner jacket, Mr Chaudhuri, but your flies are open." The very embarrassed Nirad ran into the bathroom to button up his trousers.

On another occasion I was entertaining an Icelandic author who earlier that year had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. For an hour Nirad lectured the Nobel laureate on Icelandic literature. Going out for a walk with Nirad was a treat. You could ask him about any tree, flower or bird; he could tell you all about them including references in Sanskrit or English literature. At times he lost patience with my ignorance and loudly called me a fool. His wife protested that by using that kind of language he would lose the few friends he had. "But he is a fool," retorted Nirad, "if he doesn't know these little things, what else can I call him!"

He could be equally unkind to his wife. She was a dark, matronly lady of ample girth. Once, when he got into the car and ordered the driver to take him home, his wife was still busy saying goodbye to her hosts. Suddenly Nirad Babu beamed: "I must not forget the big black boiler which keeps this little engine going."

Nirad Chaudhuri's most serious book is *Hinduism*. It is not the platitudinous repetition of what one sees in other books on the subject: *Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas,* etc. but an altogether novel and refreshing approach to Hinduism as it is practiced and what it means to the average Hindu. He fires his first salvo in the introduction:

"Salvation is never the object of the religious observances and worship of the Hindus. The main object is wordly prosperity, and this absorption in the world has made the doctrine of rebirth in it the most appealing and strongly held belief among all the notions put forward by them about existence after death. They so loved the world that they made the possibility of leaving it for good even after many cycles of birth as remote and difficult as possible."

Just about everything Nirad has to say on Hinduism will raise the hackles of orthodox Hindus but none will be able to fault him on his facts.

Perhaps the only books that did not come up to the high mark Nirad set for himself by his earlier works are *Culture in a Vanity Bag* and *Clive of India*. The first is trivial and perhaps the product of a short phase of obsession with erotica in an otherwise sedate man. The second is a too-laboured attempt to defend a character who most Indians regard as indefensible. However, they do not reduce Nirad's stature. This very small man who, when he strode down Nicholson Road in his Sola topee, was jeered by street urchins with cries of "Johnny Walker, Johnny Walker" towers above his contemporaries as one of the intellectual giants India has produced in recent years.

Eight

Prophet Manque: Aldous Huxley

H G Wells, Orwell and Aldous Huxley—three contemporaries with a vision of the future. Well's prophecies and Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* attracted more attention than Huxley's *Brave New World*. Of the three, Huxley was the greater artist, thinker and prophet. Almost blind from his school days, he overcame the handicap to win a scholarship to Oxford and won a first. He started off as a poet but soon turned to writing novels, short stories and *belles lettres*. Despite his poor vision he also painted and was vivid in his description of peoples and places. He visited India twice. He admired Mahatma Gandhi and J Krishnamurti. He was enchanted by Fatehpur Sikri but disliked the Taj Mahal. And had the courage to say so.

Aldous was a painstaking craftsman of letters. "Reading a book by Aldous Huxley is like being entertained by a host who is determined that one should not suffer a moment's boredom", wrote Francis Wyndham. How true! Few writers of the present century have been able to combine story telling with profound erudition. By general opinion he was the most prodigously learned writer of all times. This article is based on my favourite Huxley novels and a two-volume biography written by Sybille Bedford, a life-long friend of Aldous Huxley.

Whenever anyone asks me, "Who is the author who inspired you most ?" I answer without hesitation, "Aldous Huxley". Aldous may not have been very flattered by my compliment, but knowing a little about him from his friends and relations, I know he would have simply kept silent. He was too well-bred and kindly a person to say anything hurtful on anyone's face: he collected people's foibles like boys collect pebbles for their catapults. In his novels and short stories he spared no one, least of all members of his family, his closest friends and admirers.

I used to boast that the one writer all of whose works I had read was Aldous Huxley. After seeing the long list of over sixty books written by him, I find to my dismay that there are at least a dozen I had not heard of. However, that does not deter me from pronouncing on Huxley because, apart from having read most of what he has written, I had the good fortune of meeting him twice and of knowing one of his dearest friends, Naomi Mitchison, as well as his first wife's niece, Sophie Moulaert. Naomi was once in love with Aldous. And the Huxleys so loved Sophie that they wanted to adopt her as their daughter.

The first time I met Aldous Huxley must have been in the early 1960s when he was living in California with his second wife, Laura Archera. I was spending a week-end in Hollywood with a friend, a film-script writer. It was he who told me that the Huxleys had rented a cottage in the vicinity. They did not mix very much with the locals; the locals respected their wish to remain aloof. I ran into him at a grocery store one evening. It was easy to recognise him as he towered above the crowd. He was bending over every article till his nose almost touched it. He was terribly short sighted and had to bring the label within an inch of his eyes to be able to read it. He looked like a human Praying Mantis. I introduced myself as an ex-student of King's College where his elder brother Julian and H.G. Wells had taught. He didn't seem impressed and merely said "How interesting!" Then I told him that I had read just about everything he had written. He was visibly embarrassed and growled "How nice!" I thought it best to let him get on with his shopping. A year later I had the privilege of presiding over a lecture he delivered in Delhi during the Tagore Centenary celebrations. I'll speak about it later.

At the time I ran into Huxley in Hollywood, he was working on his novel *Island*. He was interviewed about his daily routine. "I work regularly", he replied, "four or five hours a day. I write everything many times over. All my thoughts are second thoughts. And I correct each page a great deal, or re-write several times as I go along."

Did he plan out his novels before writing them ? "Very dimly, when I start", he replied. The plot developed on its own. Did he find writing painful? "Not painful, though it is hard work," he answered. He was not bothered by criticism and refused to read reviews. "I never make a point of writing for any particular person or audience .... critics don't interest me because they are concerned with what's past and done, while I am concerned with what comes next. I never re-read my early novels."

Huxley recommended journalism as apprenticeship to creative writing; the discipline imposed by having to meet the deadline touches a writer. What was most important for a creative writer was to foster "love for words for their own sake and a desire to manipulate them."

Although Huxley psycho-analysed his characters with merciless skill, he had no time for Freud because Freud concerned himself "exclusively with the sick, never with healthy human beings." He also denied that his experiments with lysergic acid or mescalin were designed to enhance the quality of his writing or help him into the workings of other people's minds. He drew his characters from life—Wells, Bertrand Russel, Middleton Murry, Katherine Mansfield, Norman Douglas, D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda were easily recognisable by people who knew them. "I am not very good at creating people; I don't have a very wide repertory of characters," he admitted modestly. Though the kindest of people, he managed to hurt his friends through his portrayals of them.

"His descent both on his father's and mother's side brought down on him a weight of intellectual authority and a momentum of moral obligations," wrote Gerald Heard of Aldous Huxley. He was born on 26th July, 1894, at Laleham near Godalming in Surrey, the third son of Leonard Huxley and his wife Julia Frances Arnold. His father, a teacher at Charterhouse, was the son of the famous T.H. Huxley; his mother, the grand daughter of Dr Arnold, headmaster of Rugby and the niece of the celebrated poet, Matthew Arnold.

Aldous was born with a head too large for his body. They called him Ogie, short for ogre. He was a quiet child given to contemplation. His first years were spent in a school run by his mother. He had a passion for collecting insects and studying their habits. He won a scholarship to Eton and his first poems were published in the school magazine. In addition, he wrote many limericks that were unprintable because of their bawdiness. He read a vast amount, mainly on science and biology and learnt to paint. By the time he was sixteen, he stood a full 6 feet 4.5 inches. It was at that time he went almost blind.

He did not lose heart but taught himself Braille. Although his eyesight was seriously impaired, he managed to go for long walks and even ski in Switzerland. He won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford where he was much sought after because of his gentle manner, sophistication and brilliant conversation. It was during his days at Oxford that his brother Trev committed suicide in a fit of depression. This left a deep scar on Aldous's mind.

It was in his second year at Oxford that Aldous discovered that he could write. "I had a certain feeling for style, there was even a certain elegance in what I was doing at the age of twenty," he wrote. He also started falling in love. Naomi Haldane (later Mitchison) tried desperately to seduce him. He resisted her passion but admitted, "I fall in love with every woman I meet". He would pick up girls in the park and bring them to his home to sleep with him.

Aldous got a first in English literature. He had to make up his mind whether to write poetry or fiction. Many of his poems had by then appeared in prestigious journals but he himself realised he did not have the makings of a poet. Perhaps the best known of his poems is *The Canal:*

"No dip and dart of swallows wakes the black
slumber of the canal: a mirror dead
For lack of loveliness remembered
From ancient azures and green trees, for lack
of some white beauty given and flung back,
Secret, to her that gave: no sun has bled
To wake an echo here of answering red;
The surface stirs to no leaf's wind-blown track.

Between unseeing walls the water rests
Lifeless and hushed, till suddenly a swan
glides from some broader river blue as day,
And with the mirrored magic of his breast
Creates within that barren water-way
New life, new loveliness, and passes on."

His debut unto the world of fiction came through a patroness, Lady Ottoline Morrel, who kept an open house (Garsington) for men of letters. She had an insatiable appetite for men. Many characters in his novels *Chrome Yellow* and *Those Barren Leaves* were based on people Huxley met in Lady Ottoline's country estate. It was at Garsington that he met the Belgian *au pair* girl Maria Nys who later became his wife.

Since Aldous had no money, he took on a variety of jobs including teaching at Eton. He was not happy with these chores. "I never feel I am performing a wholly moral action except when I am writing," he told a friend. He was a workaholic. In a letter to his brother Julian, he wrote "I wish one could do without sleep, that the days were twice as long and that my strength were the strength of ten so that I could do all I want to do."

Huxley's first long short story was accepted by Chatto and Windus. They were his first publishers; he never went to another throughout his life.

After marrying Maria, the couple lived abroad more than in England. Novels and collections of short stories and essays came out with clockwork regularity. His work, wife and children completely pre-occupied Aldous's mind. Despite his poor vision, he had an eye for women. But the only one that may have succeeded in seducing him was Nancy Cunard. His passion, which lasted a year, was never fully requited. He avenged himself by portraying her as a promiscuous woman in *Point Counter Point*.

In the autumn of 1925, the Huxleys paid their first visit to India. This became the subject matter for his travelogue, *Jesting Pilate*. His biographer concludes that "his main emotion was one of horror." She is right. Huxley admitted, "India is depressing as no other country I have ever known." He was equally appalled by his own countrymen living in India.

"The sort of Englishman one meets here in trains, stations, restaurants and Dak bungalows is beyond words repulsive. Stupid, uncultured, underbred, the complete and perfect cad. In their company, one understands the Indian nationalistic aspirations. We really have no business here. And there is no doubt whatever that we are steadily making the country poorer and poorer."

Just nothing about India pleased Huxley. Even "the Taj was a disappointment." When they left, he admitted he was "rather glad to escape for he "loathed India". He was equally disappointed with Japan.

The Huxleys had befriended the Lawrences. When *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was published, it was banned and Lawrence threatened with arrest. Aldous rose to his defence. It is about this time that he finished *Point Counter Point*. He was pleased with it. "I have at last written a rather good, but also a rather frightful novel," he told a friend.

Let us sample this good and frightful novel.

Point Counter Point, published in 1928, was Huxley's eighth novel and the one which established his reputation as a major writer of the England of his times. Andre Maurois described it as "cynical, anarchic and brilliant." The story revolves round the lives of a dozen people, their amours, jealousies and hates. It is in *Point Counter Point* that we see Huxley at his malicious best, scrutinizing his characters as if they were squirming bacteria between slides under a microscope. The work is punctuated by his brilliant philosophic asides by what appear to be the cream of intellectual society of England. The author is always invisibly present at the most intimate of scenes and depicts them in his inimitably bemused and uncharitable way. My favourite scene depicts Walter Bidlake who, having seduced another man's wife and made her pregnant, is now paying court to a rich flirt, Lucy Tantamount (Nancy Cunard), daughter of Lord Tantamount. She enjoys attention from men and is an inveterate cock-teaser. One evening she receives Bidlake in her bedroom, dressed in her negligee. When he becomes too ardent, she plays hard to get. That makes him all the more frantic in his love-making. She relaxes and enjoys his caresses without really having any intention of yielding to him. This is how Huxley tells it:

"Lucy! Her eyelids fluttered and shuddered under his lips. His hand was on her breast. 'My sweetheart'. She lay quite still, her eyes still closed.

A sudden and piercing shriek made both of them start, broad awake, out of their timelessness. It was as though a murder had been committed within a few feet of them, but on someone who found the process of being slaughtered rather a joke, as well as painful.

Lucy burst out laughing. 'It's Polly'.

Both turned towards the cage. His head cocked a little on the one side, the bird was examining them out of one black and circular eye. And while they looked, a shutter of parchment skin passed like a temporary cataract across the bright expressionless regard and was withdrawn. The jocular martyr's dying shriek was once again repeated.

'You'll have to cover his cage with the cloth,' said Lucy.

Walter turned back towards her and angrily began to kiss her. The parrot yelled again. Lucy's laughter redoubled.

'It's no good,' she gasped. 'He won't stop till you cover him.'

The bird confirmed what she had said with another scream of mirthful agony.

Feeling furious, outraged and a fool, Walter got up from his knees and crossed the room. At his approach the bird began to dance excitedly on its perch; its crest rose, the feathers of its head and neck stood apart from one another like the scales of a ripened fir-cone. 'Good morning,' it said in a guttural ventriloquial voice, 'Good morning, Auntie, good morning, Auntie, good morning, Auntie ...' Walter unfolded the pink brocade that lay on the table near the cage and extinguished the creature. A last 'Good morning, Auntie' came out from under the cloth. Then there was silence.

He likes his little joke, said Lucy, as the parrot disappeared. She had lighted a cigarette.

Walter strode back across the room and without saying anything, took the cigarette from between her fingers and threw it into the fireplace. Lucy raised her eyebrows, but he gave her no time to speak. Kneeling down again beside her, he began to kiss her angrily.

'Walter,' she protested. 'No! What's come over you? She tried to disengage herself, but he was surprisingly strong. 'You're like a wild beast.' His desire was dumb and savage.

'Walter ! I insist'. Struck by an absurd idea, she suddenly laughed, 'If you knew how like the movies you were! A great huge grinning close-up.'

But ridicule was as unavailing as protest. And did she really desire it to be anything but unavailing? Why shouldn't she abandon herself? It was only rather humiliating to be carried away, to be compelled instead of to choose. Her pride, her will resisted him, resisted her own desire. But after all, why not? The drug was potent and delicious. Why not? She shut her eyes. But as she was hesitating, circumstances suddenly decided for her. There was a knock at the door. Lucy opened her eyes again. 'I'm going to say come in,' she whispered.

He scrambled to his feet and, as he did so, heard the knock repeated.

'Come in!'

The door opened. 'Mr Illidge to see you, Madam,' said the maid.

Walter was standing by the window, as though profoundly interested in the delivery van drawn up in front of the opposite house."

Huxley is in his elements depicting Sidney Quarles, a Lord Haw Haw with a voice "resonant and full of those baa-ings with which every Oxonion is accustomed to enrich the English language". "Really" in Sidney's mouth is always "Ryahlly", "mere" becomes "Myah". Sidney is full of ambition, manages to get into Parliament but is too patent an ass to be able to write a definitive book on democracy. He doesn't have it in him and spends more time sharpening his pencils, consulting reference books and making card indexes than getting down to the drudgery of writing. His understanding wife lets him indulge in his whims and relieves him of other business to enable him to write his *magnum opus* which she knows will never get written. Sidney is also a philanderer: his tastes in women run to parlour maids, waitresses and stenographers. He does not want to waste too much money on them. His latest acquisition is his Secretary, Gladys, who is most impressed with his Oxford accent and the mighty names he drops. Then she tires of his manners and having become pregnant, decides to teach him a lesson by letting her liaison be known to Sidney's wife and family. She turns up at the Quarles' residence. This is how it goes:

"Ow, a pleasant surprise!" she answered sarcastically. Emotion always resuscitated the cockney in her. She sat down, planting herself with force and determination in the chair. 'Here I am,' that determined down-sitting seemed to imply, 'and here I stay' – perhaps even, 'here I bloody well stay'.

"Pleasant indeed," said Mr Quarles mellifluously, for the sake of saying something. This was terrible, he was thinking. What could she want? And how should he get her out of the house again? But if necessary, he could say he'd sent for her to do some specially urgent typing for him. 'But very unexpected,' he added.

"Very." She shut her mouth firmly and looked at him—with eyes that Mr Quarles didn't at all like the expression of—as if in expectation. Of what?

"I'm delighted to see you, of course." he went on.

"Ow, are you?" She laughed dangerously.

Mr Quarles looked at her and was afraid. He really hated the girl. He began to wonder why he had ever desired her. "Very glad", he repeated, with dignified emphasis. The great thing was to remain dignified, firmly superior. "But..."

"But," she echoed.

"Well, ryahlly, I think it was rather rash to come here."

"He thinks it rather rash," said Gladys, as though passing on the information to an invisible third party.

"Not to say unnecessarah."

"Well, I'm the judge of that."

"After all, you know quite well that if you'd wanted to see me, you'd only got to write and I'd have come at once. So, why run the risk of coming hyah?" He waited. But Gladys did not answer, only looked at him with those hard green eyes of hers and that close-lipped smile that seemed to shut in enigmatically heaven only knew what dangerous thoughts and feelings. "I'm ryahlly annoyed with you." The manner of Mr Quarles's rebuke was dignified and impressive, but kind–always kind. "Yes, ryahlly annoyed."

Gladys threw back her head and uttered a shrill, short, hyena-like laugh.

Mr Quarles was disconcerted. But he preserved his dignity. "You may laugh." he said. "But I speak syahriously. You had no right to come. You knew quite well how important it is that nothing should be suspected. Especially hyah-hyah, in my own house. You knew it."

"Yes, I knew it," Gladys repeated, nodding her head truculently. "And that's exactly why I came." She was silent for a moment. But the pressure of her feelings made silence no longer bearable. "Because I knew you were frightened," she went on, "frightened that people might find out what you were really like. You dirty old swine." And suddenly, losing all control of her fury, she sprang to her feet and advanced on Mr Quarles so menacingly, that he recoiled a step. But her attack was only verbal. "Giving yourself such airs, as though you was the Prince of Wales. And then taking a girl to dinner at the Corner House. And blaming everybody else, worse than a person, when you're no better than a dirty old pig yourself. Yes, a dirty old pig, that's what you are. Saying you love me, indeed! I know what that sort of love is. Why, a girl isn't safe with you in a taxi. No, she isn't. You filthy old beast! And then..."

"Ryahlly, ryahlly!" Mr Quarles had sufficiently recovered from his first shock of horrified surprise to be able to protest. This was terrible, unheard of. He felt himself being devastated, laid waste to, ravaged.

"Ryahlly, ryahlly," she mimicked derisively. "And then not even taking a girl to a decent seat at the theatre. But when it was the question of your having a bit of fun in your way—oh, lord! Nasty old swine! An carrying on all the time like Rudolph Valentino, with your chatter about all the women that had been in love with you. With you! You just look at yourself in the glass. Like a red egg, that's what you are."

"Too unseemlah!"

"Talking about love with a face like that!" she went on, more shrilly than ever. "An old swine like you. And then you only give a girl a rotten old watch and a pair of earrings, and the stones in them aren't even good ones, because I asked a jeweller and he said they weren't. And now, on top of everything, I'm going to have a baby."

"A babah?" repeated Mr Quarles incredulously, but with a deeper and more dreadful sinking of apprehension. "Surely not a babah".

"Yes, a baby!" Gladys shouted, stamping her foot. "Can't you hear what I say, you old idiot? A baby. That's what I've come here about. And I won't go away till........."

It was at this moment that Mrs Quarles walked in through the French window from the garden.

There is much more to *Point Counter Point* than the two amusing pieces I have quoted. What holds the reader's interest is not the story because there is no plot behind it but the witty conversation on a baffling range of subjects between the characters, and their reactions to each other. The critic of the *Daily Telegraph* did not exaggerate when he wrote "the whole book is packed with wit and brilliance."

The Huxley novel which has stayed in my mind the longest is *After Many a Summer*, first published in 1939. The story is set in Southern California in the mock Gothic castle built by Jo Stoyte who at school was a fat, slob of a boy bullied by everyone; by the time he turned fifty, he had become a multi-billionaire, acquired a vast collection of original paintings, sculptures, and manuscripts, none of which he knew anything about except that he owned them. Amongst his treasures are crates full of diaries (Hauberk Papers) kept by a succession of English Earls. He hires an English scholar, Jeremy Pordage, to catalogue them. Stoyte (Uncle Jo) who is terrified of disease and death owns the swankiest cemetery in America and a hospital. He also has a personal physician, the dapper, raffish Sigmund Obispo who is also engaged in research of an elixir of life which would prolong Uncle Jo's life and enable him to enjoy his young mistress, Virginia Maunciple, daughter-mistress, a concubine child. Other characters are introduced to let the author express his views on topics like love, lust, solitude, optimism, money, addictions.

In the Hauberk papers, Pordage comes across the diaries of an Earl who managed to prolong his life by eating the raw gut of carp, a very long lived fish. Pordage passes on the information to Obispo. Meanwhile, Uncle Jo whose infatuation for his mistress was "simultaneously those of the purest father-love and the most violent eroticism" is distraught by a sudden change in her attitude. While she seemed to pay more attention to Obispo's handsome laboratory assistant madly in love with her, it is Obispo she yields to. The wily doctor drugs Uncle Jo with sleeping tablets to be able to spend his nights with a conscience-stricken Virginia. The story has a bizarre ending. In a fit of jealousy, Uncle Jo, who wants to kill Obispo, kills the poor lab assistant instead. Obispo blackmails Uncle Jo into parting with a sizeable part of his property in exchange for making out the murder into a death by heart-seizure. The novel ends with Jo, Virginia and Obispo stealing into the catacombs of the Earl's mansion in England where the elixir is stored and the Earl and his mistress sit side by side, still able to move after a few centuries.

The story is interesting enough; the asides on Huxley's favourite topics provide much food for thought. Love and lust are Huxley's obsessions and come in for a lot of philosophizing.

The relationship between Uncle Jo and his young keep, Virginia, and her guilt-stricken but physically fulfilling copulations with Obispo provide the author the necessary settings for his exposes on these subjects. He is scathing about women like Virginia. "What they slept with wasn't the man; it was his reputation, it was the embodiment of a function. And then, of course, some of the girls were future models for Mother's Day advertisements; some very little Florence Nightingales, on the look-out for a Crimean War. In those cases, the very infirmities of their gut-sacks were added attractions. They had the satisfaction of sleeping not only with a reputation or a stock of wisdom, not only with a federal judgeship, for example, or the presidency of a chamber of commerce, but also and simultaneously with a wounded soldier, with an imbecile child. She wouldn't have been so nearly happy as she obviously was. The cheque-book was made more attractive by being in the hands of a demigod who had to have a nanny to change his diapers."

Huxley reduces it to its coarsest essentials: when a man has an erection he wants to make use of it and thinks he is in love.

"The fact about love was that it consisted essentially of tumescence and detumescence. So why embroider the fact with unnecessary fictions? Why not be realistic? Why not treat the whole business scientifically? ... Then there were more personal reasons to preferring to take love unadorned, in the chemically pure condition... the partner had to be an amateur, and like all amateurs, committed to the thesis that tumescence and detumescence should always be associated with Love, Passion, Soul-Mating—all in uppercase letters."

"All money is pretty dirty," Huxley has one of his idealistic characters pronounce: "You're like one of these city children who has been used to getting milk in sterilized bottles from a shiny white delivery wagon. When they go out into the country and see it being pumped out of a big, fat, smelly old animal, they're horrified; they're disgusted. It's the same with money. You've been used to getting it from behind a bronze grating in a magnificent marble bank. Now you've come out into the country and are living in the cowshed with the animal that actually secretes the stuff. And the process doesn't strike you as very savoury or hygienic. But the same process was going on, even when you didn't know about it. And if you were not working for

Jo Stoyte, you'd probably be working for some college or university. But where do colleges and universities get their money from?

From rich men. In other words, from people like Jo Stoyte. Again it's dirt served out in sterile containers—by a gentleman in a cap and gown this time."

To Huxley the world of today is a pretty worthless place: "... the world where the irrelevances consist of newspapers and baseball, of sex and worry, of advertising and money and halitosis and keeping up with the Joneses. There's a hierarchy of idiocies." In such a worthless world what we enjoy best are minor sensations: "The most certain and abiding pleasures are the tiniest, the simplest, the rudimentarily animal—the pleasure of lying in a hot bath, for example, or under the bedclothes, between waking and sleeping, in the morning; the pleasure of answering the calls of nature, the pleasure of being rubbed by a good masseur, the pleasure finally of scratching when one itched. Why be ashamed?"

Huxley, like some other contemporaries indulged in making prophecies. His best known work of that genre is *Brave New World* published in 1932. What will the world be like in the 7th century A.F. (After Ford, the car manufacturer)? We will have a new caste system based on our I.Qs. Bernard Marx, a close intellectual of the highest order but victim of some mishap brings a savage from New Mexico to London. The savage who is first fascinated by all that he sees in the brave new world turns against it after his encounter with Mustapha Mond who rules the world. Twenty six years later (1958) Aldous Huxley wrote a sequel *Brave New World Revisited* in which he forescast that his earlier prophesies would come true sooner than he had first thought.

Huxley, who was a devoted husband to both his wives (he had only one extramarital infatuation) has not kind words for the institution of marriage: "Propinquity is never fusion," he writes. "The most populous city is but an agglomeration of wilderness. We exchange words, but exchange them from prison, and without hope that they will signify to others what they mean to ourselves. We marry, and there are two solitudes in the house instead of one; we beget children, and there are many solitudes. We reiterate the act of love; but again propinquity is never fusion. The most intimate contact is only of surfaces, and we couple, as I have seen the condemned prisoners at Newgate coupling with their Trulls, between the bars of our cages. Pleasure cannot be shared; like Pain, it can only be experienced or inflicted, and when we give Pleasure to our Lovers or bestow Charity upon the Needy, we do so, not to gratify the object of our benevolence, but only ourselves."

The novel that Huxley said he enjoyed writing most, *Time Must Have a Stop*, was written during the last years of World War II. It is probably also the novel a majority of Huxley admirers liked reading most. To those unfamiliar with his works, I would recommend this as an appetiser.

The story is based on an extraordinarily handsome boy of 17 named Sebastian Barnack, budding poet, lover of women and irresistible to them. He sounds very much like Lord Byron because amongst the girls who seduces him is his own cousin. (Byron is known to have made love to his sister). The plot may appear to most people to be wafer thin. Sebastian wants a dinner jacket to attend a dinner party. His widowed father, a successful barrister, and socialist, refuses to give him the money. During his vacations, Sebastian goes to Florence to stay with a rich uncle, Eustace Barnack, who loves making money, living in style and mocking his brother. Sebastian hits it off with Eustace. Eustace promises to buy him the dinner jacket. Before Sebastian can be measured out, Eustace has a session with his whore, buys a couple of original Degas of which one he promises as a gift to Sebastian at a later date. They celebrate the evening with champagne, wine and cognac. While Sebastian doses off, Eustace, who is grossly overweight, suffers a heart attack and dies. Sebastian quietly takes the Degas promised to him to be able to pay for his dinner jacket. Without telling anyone in the house, he sells it to a dealer at a very low price and gives his tailor an advance. When an inventory is made of Eustace's possessions, the disapperance of the Degas is noticed. Sebastian, still unable to own up, gets a friend to buy the Degas back and replaces it just before the police appear on the scene. Part of the price he has to pay for this petty misdemeanour is to be bedded by a slightly older ravishing beauty who he had fantasised about and who had worked out what Sebastian had been upto. In this thin plot Huxley has woven his philosophy of Time. The inspiration comes from Shakespeare:

> But thought's the slave of life, and life's times fool,
> And time, that takes survey of all the world,
> Must have a stop.

It would take me many pages to summarise Huxley's philosophical asides in this superb novel. I will only quote a couple of passages to illustrate how Huxley views the simplest of acts. The first is the highliving Eustace Barnack lighting his cigar as seen by his nephew: "And suddenly Sebastian was reminded of his cousin Marjorie's baby, nuzzling with blind concupiscence for the nipple, seizing it at last between the soft prehensile flaps of its little mouth and working away, working away in a noiseless frenzy of enjoyment. True, Uncle Eustace had rather better manners; and in his case the nipple was coffee-coloured and six inches long. Images floated up before his mind's eye; words grotesque and mock-heroic, started to arrange themselves:

> Old but an infant, mouthing with lustful lip
> The wet brown teat, incarnate where he sucks,
> of some imaginary, largest Queen
> Of all the Hottentots ....

Huxley, though capable of extreme sensitivity when describing people in love, could never resist reducing sex to anything but cold-blooded copulation. Even when Sebastian is ravished by a woman he had been dying to ravish, Huxley makes the scene brutal:

"Twin cannibals in bedlam ... The phrase came to him as he was examining the red and livid marks of teeth on his arm. Twin cannibals, devouring their own identity and one another's revening up reason and decency; obliterating the most rudimentary conventions of civilization. And yet it was precisely there, in that frenzy of the cannibals, that the real attraction had lain. Beyond the physical pleasure lay the yet more rapturous experience of being totally out of bounds, the ecstasy of an absolute alienation."

All through World War II the Huxleys stayed in the United States, mostly in California. Maria's T.B. required a dry climate, so for a part of the year they rented a house in the Mojave desert. Amongst the many people they befriended was J Krishnamurti. While he worked on *Grey Eminence* and the *Art of Seeing*, based on exercises to improve his vision, Aldous also began to experiment with drugs like Mescalin and L.S.D.

The Huxleys applied for American citizenship. He was asked if he would fight for the U.S. He replied categorically in the negative. Their case was referred to Washington. Before it could be decided, Maria's T.B. got worse and on 12th February 1955, she died. Aldous was shattered. In his grief he even lent ear to messages said to have been sent by her through a medium. A few weeks later he resumed his routine of writing and lecturing. In November he spoke at the Swami Prabhavanandas Vedanta Temple in Hollywood. The Swamiji later asserted that "Aldous was my disciple" but was unable to substantiate the claim.

As often happens, men utterly reliant and close to their wives cannot live without one. Hardly a year after Maria's death, Aldous took a second wife—an Italian named Laura Archera, a concert pianist 20 years younger than him. (His father had also taken a woman of the age of his children as his second wife). Thereafter, Huxley's experiments with drugs were supervised by Laura.

How remote from the world he could be is well illustrated by an amusing episode in New York, where Aldous had gone to lecture. Drip-dry shirts had just come into the market. Aldous acquired one and following instructions pinned on the garment, took a shower with the shirt on. He then went on the roof flapping his arms in the sun. When questioned, "I washed it once and then trotted up here. The label says "Wash and let drip dry".

In 1960 Aldous developed a tumour in his throat which, though successfully removed, gave him a forewarning of worse to come. He kept the knowledge to himself as he was by then quite a celebrity; whatever he did or happened to him got into the papers. He was appointed visiting Professor of M.I.T. His lectures were a tremendous success.

Back in Europe, Aldous and Laura motored to Switzerland where Krishnamurti was delivering a series of lectures at Gstaad. Aldous was most impressed and describing them, commented that they were "among the most impressive things I ever listened to".

Later that year (November) Aldous re-visited India to attend the Tagore Centenary celebrations. I had the privilege of presiding over the meeting he addressed in Delhi. The organisers had booked a hall which would contain about 300 people. Over 700 turned up and we had trouble getting them to sit down. Huxley watched the pandemonium with philosophical detachment. He said a few words and signed hundreds of autograph albums. His impressions of the country had not changed very much. "India is almost infinitely depressing ... there seems to be no solution to its problem in any way that any of us would regard as acceptable."

Aldous mollified his audience by a few soothing assurances that he did not mean to hurt anyone's feelings. And curiously enough on this second visit he did find the Taj "not as unsightly... but for the minarets like chimney pots." He was enchanted by Fatehpur Sikri.

American groves of academe vied with each other in getting Aldous to deliver lectures. His frail health made it difficult for him to keep all his commitments. One day a friend asked him if he ever prayed. "I always say my prayers in the simplest possible words," replied Aldous. "I always begin, 'Now I lay me down to sleep' and my prayers are nearly always answered."

While in Europe, Aldous had an audience with Pope John without the slightest change in his basic agnosticism. By the time he rejoined his family under an assumed name, he recovered and was able to resume lecturing and writing. *Island* was to be his last major work of fiction. He knew his days were numbered—he was in and out of hospital—but he continued working as best as he could and refused to give in to self pity. By strange coincidence, amongst the last essays he had to write was one on Shakespeare and the line he paused on for long was from Claudio's speech: "Ah, but to die, and go we know not where". The day he finished the Shakespeare article, he dictated Prospero's speech:

"Our revels are now ended
We are such stuff
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with sleep."

His voice became inaudible and he had to write down whatever he wanted to say. About the last note, which was to the doctor attending on him said "LSD-Try it. Intramuscular 100 mm." The end came on the evening of 22nd November 1963, the day John Kennedy was assassinated.

The next day Aldous Huxley's body was cremated without any religious or other ceremony. Eight years later, his ashes were taken to England to be interned in the graves of his parents. And a year later Maria's ashes were mingled with his.

Nine

Belloc : Bigot and Gentleman

In the mid 1930's when I was in college in England, four men dominated the literary scene—Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. The first two were Socialists and non-believers; the other two Roman Catholics, racist, with fascist sympathies. I did not know about this at the time when I started reading Chesterton and Belloc. But when I heard them praise Mussolini and General Franco, and make derogatory remarks about Jews and coloured people, my admiration for them turned to disgust and I refused to read anything written by them.

It was after many years that I returned to Belloc. Oddly enough, it was after reading two lines quoted by some reviewer in which Belloc had described a woman's beauty. I thought they fitted Indira Gandhi and put them down in my personal book of quotations.

"Her face was like the King's command
When all the swords are drawn"

I acquired a very expensive edition of Belloc's poems published by Nonesuch Press. I enjoyed his verses largely because they were easy to understand, witty, and observed the traditional rules of rhyme and metre. There was no anti-semitism or fascism in the anthology. My curiosity to find out how a man of such fine sensibilities could be at the same time a religious bigot, a Jew-baiter, supporter of a buffoon like Mussolini and on the side of a fascist like General Franco induced me to pick up A.N. Wilson's biography *Hilaire Belloc*, first published in 1984 and brought out later in paperback by Penguin. It gave answers to my questions because it is a well-balanced account of the man who was a good poet as well as a writer of potboilers, a faithful husband who neglected his wife and children, a man of limited means who borrowed money from anyone he could touch, a hard drinker, an eccentric and yet a gentleman.

Belloc was born on July 27, 1870 in a well-to-do Roman Catholic family of mixed English and French lineage. Some suspect that there may have been Jewish blood in his veins and the name Belloc was a derivation of the German-Jewish Bloch. He was a precocious child who started composing verses at the age of five. One can sense maturity in his first published poem:

"I had a little fly
I called it Silver Wing
And over little bits of thread
This little Fly would spring.

I made it little hedges
Of little bits of thread;
And I made a stick memorial
When this little Fly was dead!"

He did very well at school and won prizes for composition and debating. The child grew to adolescence, and childish verse to perceptive ripeness:

"A lost thing could I never find,

Nor a broken thing mend:
And I fear I shall be all alone
When I get towards the end.
Who will be there to comfort me
Or who will be my friend?"

Belloc, the school boy, had strong views against sexual deviation. In public schools where masturbation and buggery were common, he who was to remain a virgin till he married, wrote the following:

"The world is full of double beds
And sweet young things with maidenheads;
This being so, there's no excuse
For sodomy or self-abuse."

Belloc, who was bilingual and had yet to make up his mind about his nationality, had no doubt about what he wanted to do: "My desire is to make a name in literature and as I can write in English, I choose England if it be possible."

Belloc had dreamt of living like an affluent country gentleman, writing at leisure for his own pleasure. The dream was shattered when he found out that his mother had squandered away all the family fortunes. Instead of going to university, he had to earn his livelihood. He worked as a land agent and then as a draftsman to an architect. At the same time he met Elodie Hogan, an American Catholic girl from California. The two fell in love and wanted to get married. The penniless Belloc sold his prize books to follow Elodie to the States and did manual jobs to get to California. Elodie's mother refused them permission to marry till such time as Belloc could maintain her. A heart-broken Hilaire trudged back home and did his compulsory military service with the French Army. He expressed his love for Elodie in verses written to her:

"You came without a human sound
You came and brought my soul to me
I only woke, and all around

They slumbered on the firelit ground
Beside the guns in Burgundy.

I felt the gesture of your hands
You signed my forehead with the Cross;
The gesture of your holy hands
Was bounteous – like the misty lands
Along the Hills in Calvados..."

Ultimately, Belloc's dream of going to university was realised when he gained admission to Balliol College, Oxford. He made his mark as an orator and a writer and was elected President of the University Union. He ended with a First. He took no interest in games but got all the exercise he needed by walking. Many a time when he wanted to go to London, instead of taking train or a bus, he walked all the 54 miles.

He had set his heart on an academic career but despite his First, his debating and writing, he was turned down for every post he applied for. He did not lose hope and stayed on in Oxford. Still without a job, he decided to get married and once again scrounged his way to California. On June 15, 1896, Hilaire and Elodie were joined in holy wedlock—both virgins and innocent of sex. It was a strange relationship. They had children but very little else in common and shared their problems through correspondence as Belloc spent most of his time travelling over Europe or on lecture tours of the United States. Having been rejected by Oxford, he turned bitter against his *alma mater*, Balliol. "The college is for the most part composed of niggers and Scotchmen; and the prevailing dialect is a compound of Gaelic and Hindustani," he sneered.

The Bellocs moved to Chelsea (London). In 1896, his first collection, *Verses and Sonnets*, was published. It won him national acclaim. Many poems showed a rare sensitivity and haunting beauty.

"The moon is dead, I saw her die
She in a drifting cloud was drest

She lay along the uncertain west
A dream to see
And very low she spake to me:
I go where none may understand,
I fade into the nameless land
And there must lie perpetually.
And therefore I,
And therefore, loudly, loudly I
And high
And very piteously make cry:
The Moon is dead. I saw her die."

Belloc's popularity was largely due to his humorous satirical verse and poems written for children. *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts* followed by *More Beasts For Worse Children* were instant successes.

Poetry books do not earn much money. Belloc had to take on commissions like writing a history of Paris, and lecture tours to keep the home fires burning. He had bought a dilapidated old barn, King's Land, in Sussex where he dumped his family. It had no electricity or running water. The family were later to boast, "We Bellocs don't take baths." He developed a passion for telephones and spent long hours talking to friends. Almost the first thing he did when invited out was to ask, "May I use your telephone?" He also started drinking hard. In his *The Path to Rome* which established his literary reputation, he caricatured himself as "an opinionated super-tramp, happy so long as there is Mass at the beginning of the day, wine and Catholic good cheer at the end of it."

In the first decade of the new century, Belloc produced his best work. He began to dabble in politics and cultivated Lloyd George to get a Liberal party nomination for Parliament. He was given South Salford, a "marginal" constituency largely inhabited by Protestants. He was advised to play down his being a Catholic. He turned down the advice with characteristic disdain. At his first meeting he said: "Gentlemen, I am a Catholic. As far as possible I go to mass every day." He took out his rosary from his pocket and continued: "This is a rosary. As far as possible, I kneel down and tell these beads every day. If you reject me on account of my religion, I shall thank God that He has spared me the indignity of being your representative."

Belloc was to win this constituency twice. He became a familiar figure in the House of Commons, but despite his oratory no one took him seriously. He was also disillusioned with the vulgarity of his fellow MPs and came to the conclusion that Parliament was a "sham, a waste of time, riddled with corruption". He vented his spleen on Lloyd George who had casually remarked that Belloc's political career was over. "One day you will be forgotten," he said to the leader of his party, "but I, like my Saviour, will rise again on the Third Day."

Money problems continued to dog Belloc. He took on jobs as literary editor of magazines but could never be relied on to deliver his copy on time or observe office hours. His outspoken anti-semitism closed other avenues of employment. Amongst his oft- quoted barbs were his lines on Montague (of the Montague Chelmsford reforms), who had been elevated to peerage as Lord Swaythling:

"Lord Swaythling whom we loved and knew
On earth as Mr Montague,
Will probably be known in hell
As Mr Moses Samuel."

He made similar remarks about Lord Reading, later to be Viceroy of India.

Belloc extolled the virtues of a stable home in *The Four Men* but was himself never at home more than a week at a time. The grossly neglected Elodie who was only 42 got cancer and died in February 1914. Belloc became hysterical, clung to her corpse and had to be forcibly separated from it. He had Elodie's bedroom with all its contents padlocked, never to be touched by anyone and took to wearing black suits with black ties as signs of mourning. None of this exaggerated exhibition of sorrow prevented Belloc from resuming his globe-trotting, hard drinking and—now with a clear conscience—paying court to other women. He also got a job with a regular salary which allowed him to indulge in these pastimes. Among his lady friends was a young widow in her twenties, Juliet Duff, a huge woman 6 feet 3 inches tall, so clumsy that she knocked down vases when she entered any room. Juliet, described by a contemporary as "the ugliest beauty", became Belloc's sweetheart when he was in his mid-forties:

"Two visions permanent; his native place
Found after days at sea, and Juliet's face."

And again:

"How did the party go in Portman Square?
I cannot tell you, Juliet was not there.
And how did Lady Gaster's party go?
Juliet was next me and I do not know."

War brought tragedy in Belloc's life. He lost a number of close friends and finally his own son: His room in King's Land was also sealed. More love-affairs followed. One nearly came to marriage, but Belloc refrained from marrying the lady because she was a divorcee and his Church forbade such marriages.

Belloc continued churning out books, mostly pot-boilers, which he himself thought nothing of. A story is told of his travelling in a train when he saw a man in the compartment reading his *History of England*. He asked him what he had paid for the book. On being told, he took the sum out of his pocket and gave it to the man, then took the book out of his hand and tossed it out of the window. Whether anything really mattered to him is a matter of conjecture. He snarled at Jews and called them Yids. To him every coloured man was a nigger, yet he employed a Jewess for many years as a secretary and nurse of his children. He professed to be a devout Catholic and brought many eminent men including G.K. Chesterton into the church. Yet he describes Jesus Christ as a milksop. "I revere him because I am instructed to by the church, but personally I find him repellent," he wrote. The Pope, who received him, was described as "some greasy monsignore"; the church as being "lumbered with so much Yiddish folklore" and the Old Testament, "for the most part, an unedifying piece of tribal mythology". All that really mattered to him was drinking and the company of friends, notably Chesterton, who was seen so often with him that people referred to them as Chesterbelloc.

By the Second World War Belloc had become an old man and shed some of his sympathy for dictators. Early in 1942 he had a mild stroke and it was thought that his end had come. This was not so. When the nurse brought him a glass of milk, he shouted at her, "Take that filthy stuff away and bring me a glass of wine." He recovered and wrote, "The business of human life turns, as I have heard that battles turn, not to tragedy but to agony towards the end." In one of his poems he wrote:

"You find that middle life goes racing past
You find despair and at the very last,
You find you are giving up the ghost
That those who loved you best
despised you most."

In old age, he grew a beard. He became forgetful and clumsy, often repeating himself like a doll with a string which, when pulled, comes out with the same sentences. Instead of using the lavatory, he hobbled out into the garden to urinate. Often he would break into bawdy song, his favourite being "Chase me, girls, I've got a banana." Malcolm Muggeridge, who visited him, thought him "not a serene man. Although he has written about religion all his life, there seemed to be very little in him."

Friends came to King's Land to celebrate his 80th birthday. "I have one foot in the grave," he said, pointing to his thick hand-made boot, "this foot." Some days later he stumbled into the grate of his fireplace while trying to remove a live ember which had fallen out. He passed out and was taken to hospital. On Thursday July 16, 1953 he went into a coma from which he never came out.

Ten

Oscar Wilde's World of Pleasure and Pain

Wilde's reputation as a homosexual has blighted his image as a master craftsman of the English language and one of the wittiest men of his times which included Bernard Shaw, Yeats, Chesterton, Belloc, Gide, Whistler Beardsley and many renowned men of letters and the arts. In proportion to his output, next to Shakespeare, he has more quotable quotes to his credit than any other writer. Poet, essayist, novelist, short story writer (including some memorable ones for children), playwright and critic, he was averse to writing his own autobiography. He is best known for his homosexual novel, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray;* his plays, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*; the long poem written in prison, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and the profoundly moving epilogue *De Profundis.*

Oscar Wilde has been the subject of many biographies including those by his friends like Frank Harris and Andre Gide and his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. This article is largely based on the latest, written by Richard Ellman. It took him 20 years of research and was published earlier this year by Alfred Knopf (New York). In three months the book is in its fourth printing. "Though he offered himself as the apostle of pleasure, his created world contains much pain", writes Ellman.

Oscar was the second son of an eminent Irish doctor, Sir William Robert Wilde, a celebrated eye, nose and throat specialist practising in Dublin, and his flamboyant, six foot tall wife who wore the most outlandish dresses and jewellery and gave herself a Spanish name, Speranza. Of her, Oscar wrote, "Where there is no extravagance, there is no love, and where there is no love, there is no understanding". The son inherited much of his talent and iconoclasm from his mother. Once, when she was asked to receive a woman who was "respectable", Lady Wilde replied, "You must never employ that description in this house. It is only tradespeople who are respectable–we are above respectability."

The family's notion of respectability was unconventional. Sir William had fathered three illegitimate children before he married Speranza. She did not resent his past (nor future infidelities including an accusation of having raped one of his patients) and welcomed her husband's other children to spend their summer holidays with her own two sons and daughter.

Oscar was born on October 16, 1854 and christened Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. The mother had hoped for a daughter and for years dressed Oscar as a girl—no doubt this contributed to his sexual problems. She expected much from her sons. A fierce sibling rivalry grew up between the boys. The mother's favourite was the one who showed more promise of success. At first it was her elder son, Ian, who did well in school at studies and games. Oscar started badly by being an indifferent scholar and had contempt for sports. But no sooner did he get a scholarship, first to Trinity

College, Dublin, then to Magdalen College, Oxford, than he became his mother's favourite child.

Lady Wilde was a poet of sorts. At 18, Oscar began to dream of becoming a poet and writer. His early favourites were Keats, Swinburne, Rosetti, Baudelaire and Whitman. Of the first two he wrote: "Effeminacy and languor and voluptousness are the background of their poetry." He had mastered Greek and Latin at school; through governesses he learnt to speak, read and write French, German and Italian with equal fluency.

Wilde described his years in Oxford as the most "flower-like time" in his life. He became the most sought after companion at parties. He continued to disdain sports, then much prized at the university. "Exercise!", he told one interviewer, "the only possible exercise is to talk, not to walk. It is so exhausting not to talk". He was strongly drawn towards the Catholic Church but refrained from joining it for fear of incurring his father's wrath. Instead he became a Freemason and enjoyed their ritual and paraphernalia.

At the same time he began to defy convention. "Mankind has been continually entering the prison of puritanism, philistinism, survivalism, fanaticism, and turning the key on its own spirit. But after a time there is an enormous desire for higher freedom for self preservation". He was regarded as a freak. But he had set his sights on his future. "I will be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other, I will be famous, and if not famous, notorious".

Wilde ended his Oxford years in a blaze of glory winning the Newdigate prize and getting a double first. He mocked himself by the description *"the infamous St Oscar of Oxford, poet and martyr"*.

Despite his academic achievements, Oscar failed to get a job in the university and shifted to London. He became the darling of the upper class society and the theatrical world, which at the time was led by Lily Langtry and her paramour, Edward, Prince of Wales. He used episodes in Lillie's affairs for his play *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Lily became Oscar's favourite flower. Other famous actresses who fell to his charms included the Pole, Helen Modjeska, Ellen Terry and Sarah Bernhardt. When his mother came to live with him, they entertained lavishly. Amongst regular guests were Whistler, Ruskin, Bernard Shaw, Yeats, and Gilbert. Whistler could match Wilde's wit. Once when Wilde said, "How I wish I had said that" Whistler replied, "You will Oscar, you will".

Oscar Wilde's first collection of poems was published simultaneously in England and the United States. The tone was set by the opening poem *Helas:*

"To drift with easy passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute upon which all words can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
mine ancient wisdom and austere control?"

The collection was panned as a massive plagiarisation. Wilde was saved the embarrassment of answering his critics by an invitation to lecture in the United States. It was on his arrival that he came out with his most quoted retort to the customs officer who asked him if he had anything to declare, "I have nothing to declare except my genius", he replied, "I have come here to diffuse beauty". Meeting other celebrities of the literary world he declared, "I am never disappointed in literary men. I think they are perfectly charming. It is their works I find so disappointing". Other epigrams rolled off his tongue: "It is a vulgar error to suppose that America was ever discovered; it was merely detected." He expressed admiration for Walt Whitman, "the grandest man I have ever seen". Whitman made no secret of his being homosexual. Wilde responded. "The kiss of Walt Whitman is still on my lips", he boasted. Appartently, he also indulged in homosexual relations with other young men.

He drew full houses, but both in America and England, men of letters were critical of his exhibitionism and unkind remarks. ("Longfellow is a great poet .... only for those who never read poetry"). It did not bother him very much. "Praise makes me humble. But when I am abused, I know I have touched the stars".

He earned handsome fees to spread his message, "The supreme object of life is to live. Few people live. It is true life only to realise one's perfection, to make one's every dream a reality. Even this is possible."

In Paris, Wilde befriended another celebrated homosexual, Andre Gide, 15 years younger than him. Gide was enthralled: "He (Oscar) emits rays", he said. When Wilde returned to London, Gide confessed he felt "de-virginated" and desolate. Gide was mother-obsessed and a deeply religious protestant full of inhibitions. "His lips were too straight, the lips of someone who has never lied" complained Wilde. "I must teach you to lie so your lips will be beautiful and curled."

Wilde's first successful play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, brought him more fame and money. The famous Sarah Bernhardt agreed to play the main role in his *Salome*. The play was banned. Oscar exploded with anger: "The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all. Authority over him and his art is ridiculous." He denounced the English as a race of hypocrites and would have asked for French citizenship if it did not involve compulsory military service. *Salome* was not staged, but was published. And panned by critics as borrowed stuff. "Of course I plagiarise", retorted Wilde, "it is the privilege of the appreciative man".

In the summer of 1892 Wilde met the young and beautiful Lord Alfred Douglas who was to prove his *homme fatale*. Wilde fell for Alfred Douglas. "What a silly thing love is," he wrote, "It is not half as useful as logic, for it does not prove anything and it is always telling one things that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true." Alfred, still at Oxford, responded to the love. In a poem composed later he coined the line, "I am the love that dare not speak its name".

Alfred Douglas (Bosie to his friends) was the youngest son of the Marquess of Queensberry, a boxer and a rich aristocrat with a foul temper. His first wife divorced him and the second had the marriage rescinded on grounds of his impotence. Alfred had a malformed penis. He inherited his ancestor's temper and extravagant habits; he had no compunction in living off Wilde's bounty. He introduced many male prostitutes to Wilde, some of them blackmailers. Wilde had become reckless. He lived with Alfred Douglas in one bedroom at the Savoy Hotel, London. To a friend he said, "I have made three marriages in my life, one with a woman and two with men". He became a pederast and abandoned his wife and two sons. His mother was saddened but stayed loyal. His youngest brother, who had made a mess of two marriages, became an enemy.

Meanwhile, Alfred Douglas flunked his exams and was sent down from Oxford. His father ascribed his son's failure to the evil company of Oscar Wilde, accused him of sodomy and threatened to shoot him. Wilde sought legal advice and, egged on by Alfred Douglas, decided to sue the Marquess for criminal libel. One cause of complaint was a note the Marquess had addressed as "To Oscar Wilde, ponce and sandomite" (spelling was not the strong point of the boxer peer). The Marquess was arrested and granted bail. As it turned out, it was Oscar Wilde's works and conduct that were brought to trial. A woman prostitute was produced to say that her business had suffered because of competition from boys. There were 15 counts of sodomy against him. His friends tried to persuade him to drop his libel case and flee from the country. But Alfred Douglas was adamant and Wilde stayed on to face the music.

At first he was in his elements "Have you ever adored a young man madly?" he was asked. "I have never given adoration to anybody except myself," he replied amidst applause. A servant boy was produced in the box and Wilde was asked, "Did you ever kiss him?" Wilde erred in his reply: "Oh, dear no. He was a peculiarly ugly boy. He was unfortunately extremely ugly. I pitied him for it." When further asked why he had referred to the boy as extremely ugly, Wilde replied, "For this reason, if I were asked why I did not kiss a doormat, I should say because I do not like to kiss doormats". Wilde denied all charges of buggery. The case, however, went against him and Wilde was put under arrest. The charges were indecency and sodomy.

It was ironic that at the time two of Wilde's plays *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* were drawing full houses, Wilde's name was removed from the hoarding, deleted from club membership rolls and due to his inability to pay the dues of litigation, declared bankrupt, his manuscripts, books, pictures and artefacts attached by the bailiff.

The jury was heavily prejudiced against Wilde. Amongst the exhibits produced were faecal stains in bedsheets on which he was accused of practising buggery. All his eloquence, quoting Plato, Michaelangelo and Shakespeare extolling homosexual love, was of no avail. While on trial awaiting sentence, friends tried to get Wilde out of England. But Wilde foolishly hoped for an acquittal. The judge found him guilty for having "been the centre of extensive corruption of the most hideous kind among young men" and sentenced him to two years' imprisonment with hard labour. The celebrated poet, playwright and writer of epigrams was led out of court in handcuffs. Harlots celebrated his conviction by dancing in the streets. The Marquess of Queensberry held a large banquet.

Wilde was in the depths of gloom and despair. For months he was not allowed to receive visitors nor given books to read or paper to write on. He spoke to no one and began to masturbate. Amongst his earlier visitors was his wife, Constance, who had changed her name to Holland and who promised to take him back if he severed his relationship with Alfred Douglas. Wilde agreed to do so because he had become bitter with Alfred. It was in prison that he wrote what is perhaps his most moving piece of prose, *De Profundis* addressed to Douglas. In it he mentions the harrowing experience he had while being transferred from one prison to another. He was standing handcuffed at Clapham station when a crowd jeered at him and one man came up and spat on him. Wilde wrote, "I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time."

He refused to permit Alfred Douglas to dedicate his poems to him. It did not deter Douglas from writing, "Today I am proud that I have been loved by a great poet, who perhaps esteemed me because he recognised that, besides a beautiful body, I possessed a beautiful soul". On his part, Wilde, in the bitterness of his soul, heaped his downfall on Alfred's head. "The gods had given me everything. I had genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring. I made art of philosophy and philosophy of art. I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder and whatever I touched I made beautiful."

His mother died while he was still in prison. He was not allowed to attend her funeral. Meanwhile he was witness to a fellow prisoner being taken out of his cell to be hanged. He had been convicted for the murder of his 23-year-old wife whom he had loved. This left a deep impression on Wilde's mind and became the subject of his last and best known poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.*

Wilde did not get any remission for good behaviour and had to serve his full sentence. When set at liberty at a railway station, Wilde exploded with joy. "Oh beautiful world! Oh beautiful world!"

The warden reprimanded him: "Now Mr Wilde, you musn't give yourself away like that. You're the only man in England who would talk like that in a railway station."

Wilde went into exile in France under a number of assumed names, one of them, being Melmoth. Friends rallied round him, among them the poet, Dousou, who persuaded him to give sex with a woman another trial and procured a prostitute in Dieppe. "It was like chewing cold mutton," said Wilde with disgust, "but tell it in England where it will entirely restore my reputation."

Wilde broke his promise to his wife and once again took up with Bosie. He was chronically short of money. "Like dear St. Francis of Assisi, I am wedded to poverty but in my case the marriage is not a success. I hate the bride that has been given to me", he told a friend. And to another he said, "I have lived, yes, I have lived. I drank the sweet, I drank the bitter, and I loved the bitterness in the sweetness and the sweetness in the bitterness ... the cruelty of a prison sentence starts when you come out."

In April 1898 the long suffering Constance died. The name Wilde was chiseled out from her tombstone. The following month Oscar had to have his throat operated on. Neither seemed to have lessened his homosexual lust. On the French Riviera he accosted fisher boys. He was said to be working on a script for a musical *"The Buggers Opera"*, as Whistler unkindly described it. It was never completed. He developed ear trouble and had to have his eardrums removed. His health suddenly deteriorated. He died at 2 p.m. on November 30, 1900. As he breathed his last, his body exploded, emitting fluid from his ear, nose, mouth and other orifices. There were only seven mourners including Gide and Bosie at the funeral. Bosie almost fell into the grave. He was first buried at La Chaise cemetery in Paris. Epstein designed the gravestone.

Wilde did not write his autobiography but in some ways the refrain of the *Ballad of Reading Gaol* is a summation of his own life:

Yet each man kills the thing he loves
By each let this be heard
Some do it with a bitter look
Some with a flattering word
The coward does it with a kiss
The brave man with the sword.

Oscar Wilde loved himself. And killed himself.

Eleven

Ungentle into the Good Night: Dylan Thomas

Petty thief, congenital sponger and borrower of money, drunkard and compulsive womaniser—Dylan Thomas was all these. He was also the master craftsman of modern poetry who wrote the most ecstatic lyrics known in the English language. Three years after leaving school (he never went to a university) he wrote more than 200 poems. In the last seven years of his life, he wrote only eight because he was drunk most of the time or in bed with some woman or the other. If it was not women, it was gout or bronchitis. Nevertheless, he could rise to sublime heights reciting poetry, holding large audiences spell bound with his rich, mellifluous voice. Those who heard him vouch for the fact that listening to him was an experience of a lifetime.

Dylan Thomas rose like a fiery meteor in the English firmament during World War II and burnt himself out before he was forty years old.

One evening in the autumn of 1951 when I was living in a basement flat in Highgate, close to Hampstead Heath, Wynford Vaugh Thomas, the well-known B.B.C commentator, who had covered the Indo-Pak partition of 1947, rang me up and asked me if he could bring a friend over for a drink: "Dylan Thomas, surely you must know of him." I admitted I knew the name but had not read anything by him. They were both welcome. I had recently resigned my job as Press Attache with the Indian High Commission but had taken good care to lay by a large stock of duty-free liquor for my rainier days. I kept an open house for the thirsty. During the mornings I worked on my translations of the Sikh scriptures, spent the afternoons wandering about the Heath and in the evenings awaited spongers. Word had got round that I could be touched for a drink or two any evening I was at home.

I do not recall Dylan Thomas very clearly because Wynford did most of the talking, regaling us with horror stories of what he saw of the killings in Lahore and Amritsar. Dylan sat morosely listening to his friend — he had probably heard these episodes many times and concentrated on drinking. It was after seeing his portrait by Augustus John that his face came back vividly to my memory: a cherubic, pink-faced boy with a nose upturned like Shabana Azmi's. And curly, golden-brown hair. He looked younger than his years. I thought he was still in his twenties. It was after his death in 1953 that I realised that he was 37 when he dropped in on me. I cannot claim to have known him. I only shook hands with him twice, exchanged a few sentences and asked him to help himself to anything he liked.

When he died, the media went berserk, heaping eulogies on him. Anyone who didn't rave about Dylan Thomas was regarded as a philistine. I bought myself a collection of his poems. I could not understand even one of them. An old American friend, James Laughlin, who had helped Dylan Thomas on his visit to the States sent me a tiny booklet

Conversations About Christmas. This was easier to comprehend but nothing very remarkable. My publisher, Barney Rosset of Grove Press, sent me his *Under Milkwood*. I am not sure if I understand all of it, but I caught glimmerings of bejewelled words shining out of mists of obscurity. They shone brighter when I heard a recording of the play in his voice. I have again gone through his *Collected Poems–1934-52*. They still make little sense to me, but the images they conjure up can be very powerful. Those who wish to savour his poetry would be well advised to start with his biography *Dylan Thomas* by Paul Ferris (Penguin). It places poems in their chronological order and explains the circumstances in which they were written. This makes them a lot easier to understand.

Dylan Thomas was born on 27 October, 1914 at Swansea (Wales). His father was an indigent school master with a permanent grouse against the world which did not recognise his genius. He often drowned his disappointments in drink. But he was a stern *pater familias* and hoped that his son would succeed where he had failed. Dylan was mollycoddled and spoilt by his mother and a long-suffering elder sister. He was a born liar and learnt to steal money whenever he needed it. If he could not get his hands in people's pockets, he had no qualms about asking people he hardly knew to lend him money. He never returned a loan.

His mother's indulgence and his father's gruffness left deep psychological scars on Dylan's psyche. She continued to cuddle and kiss him till he was 17. She removed the tops of eggs for him and fed him. He expected the same from women who came into his life. He was a cry-baby. When he howled, his mother had to soothe him while his father yelled angrily, "Put the little bugger through the window." Sexual inadequacy was to haunt him all his life. He wrote a lot about sex in his stories but not in one was the act of sex satisfactorily consummated.

Dylan was a precocious child and published his poems in his school magazine. It was later found that he had stolen someone else's work. He was also full of mischievous pranks. A girl friend of his school days came upon him and his friends one day and heard him boast, "Look! I can write *God Save The King*", as he peed the letters on the wall. The following poem is said to have been composed before he was ten years old.

"She moved like silence swathed in light,
Like mist in moonshine clear;
A music that enamoured sight
Yet did elude the ear."

The echoes of "She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies" though faint, can be clearly discerned.

Dylan was never lacking in friends. They mixed horseplay and flirtation with village lasses with composing poetry—sometimes everyone contributing one line. For their joint efforts they chose a common name, Walter Bram: Bram is Welsh for fart.

His school career came to an inglorious end: in his final examination he failed in every subject except English. As soon as he finished school, he got a job in a local newspaper and learnt to drink. More than once he was caught lifting articles and poems from books and magazines and passing them off as his own. There were however others which were unmistakeably his work. At the time, his sex urges were assuming explosive potential. He had no time for love or romance, only for lust in all its intensity.

"High on a hill,
Straddle and soak
Out of the way of the eyes of men,
Out of the way,
Straddle her wrinkled knees
Until the day's broken –
Christ, let me write from the heart,
War on the heart –
Puff till the adder is,

Breathe till the snake is home,
Inch on the old thigh
Till the bird has burst his shell
And the carnal stem that stood
Blowing with the blood's ebb,
Is fallen down,
To the ground."

He knew that not many people could take this kind of poetry in their stride. He couldn't care less:

"I shall turn the strongest stomach up
With filth I gather
From the thousand minds, all lust and wind,
Like a beachcomber in the time of light."

Dylan proved to be as indifferent a reporter as he had been a student. When he failed to cover an incident, he would make up one which had not occurred. His paper refused to trust his reports. Journals to which he sent his poems and short stories sent them back. Dylan treated them with contempt. "They are rejecting me now but the day will come when the name of Dylan Thomas will be echoed from shore to shore. Only I won't be able to hear it," he wrote to a friend. He expressed self-confidence in an epitaph he composed for himself:

"I am man's reply to every question.
His aim and destination."

Through his sister, Nancy, he got on to the amateur stage. When Nancy married Haydn Taylor, he found another person he could turn to for money. Haydn took care never to leave his wallet lying about if Dylan was around.

The decade starting with the summer of August 1933 was the most productive of Dylan's life as a poet. Before he was 18, one of his poems had been broadcast in his own voice by the B.B.C. in its National Programme and many had been published. One of his poems was published by *The Listener:*

"Light breaks where no sun shines;
Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart
push in their tides".

No one is sure what the lines mean. The following stanza seems explicitly sexual:

"A candle in the thighs.
Warms youth and seed and burns and seeds of age."

Whether or not people understood the poem, it earned Dylan many new and important friends, including eminent poets like T S Eliot, Stephen Spender and Geoffrey Grigson. Others were strong meat for the jaded appetites of England's literati. "Poetry", wrote Dylan "should be as orgiastic and organic as copulation... poetry is a medium, not a stigmata on paper."

On his 19th birthday in October 1933, Dylan lost his virginity. His claims to have had sex earlier have been dismissed as figments of his fantasy. The same year he had his first serious love affair with Pamela Hansford Johnson, later a successful novelist and wife of Lord C.P. Snow. Much of our information of Dylan's activities during these years comes from the voluminous correspondence they exchanged.

Though Dylan had no university education, he was an avid reader of books and had no doubt in his mind about his avocation. He was going to be a writer and a poet unlike any before him. His canvas was Wales: the sea, farm-houses and small towns. One can meet some of them in his autobiographical-fictional *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Dog*.

Dylan had a passion for words. To him they had a life, sound, smell and personalities of their own. "There is torture in words, torture in their linking and spelling, in the snail of their course... In the beginning was a word I can't spell, not a reversed Dog, or a physical light, but a word as long as Glastonbury and as short as pith. Nor does it lisp like the last word, break wind like Balzac through a calligraphied window.." His favourite quotation was from the New Testament. "In the beginning was the word." He told a friend, "When I experience anything, I experience it as a thing and a word at the same time, both equally amazing". He told Pamela that his poems began with words, not ideas. Later he expressed his determinations : "I've got to get nearer to the bones of words."

The affair with Pamela came to a sticky end sometime in 1934. He went on a binge for three days with "a lank red-mouthed girl with a reputation like hell". He confessed it in detail in a letter to Pamela. The girl had been picked by his friend, "but as soon as he got in bed with her she screamed and ran into mine. I slept with her that night and for the next three nights." His subsequent attempt to make up with Pamela was hardly likely to appease her. "Here I am getting older and no wiser, and have lately become entangled with an erotic girl with whom I indulge in unrepeatable displays of carnality. In your tight-tided little island, does the hank of bone and the curled slit play its hot, customary part?"

Pamela tried to redeem him from drink and fornication. She failed. Dylan continued to drink hard, loved clowning in crowded pubs (while running under tables on all fours and barking like a dog, he broke a front tooth) and coining clever epigrams: "Let copulation thrive!." When birth control was legalised, he remarked, "it will go down in history as a French Day."

Dylan moved to London. His poems were being accepted by prestigious journals. Whatever little he earned, he drank up. Finally, Pamela despaired of him. "He says he loves me but he can't resist Comrade Bottle," she wrote in 1935. She dropped him. Dylan drowned his sorrows in more drink and sex, including a few homosexual affairs with "Sodom hipped young men," or "the willing buttocked". In 1936 he boasted of having a "a dose of clap". For six months he was treated for gonorrhea. His chest, which was never very strong, became weaker and he often coughed up blood.

"I've got death in me," he said nonchalantly. His behaviour in public places became more bizarre. Once, in a crowded pub, he stood up on the counter, opened his fly buttons and offered his penis to a girl.

In 1936 in a pub he ran into Caitlin Macnamara, a robust, high spirited beauty a year older than him. She had been a model of the famous portrait painter, Augustus John, and like his other models, had slept with him. She had also been a chorus girl. The painter introduced Caitlin to Dylan. Soon after, Dylan rewarded him by punching him on the nose and driving off with Caitlin. They were married in a registry office on 11 July, 1937. A friend paid for the marriage licence. Augustus John gave his blessing and later painted Dylan's portrait.

As could have been predicted, the marriage did not run smoothly. Both were hard drinkers, and fought as wildly as they made love. And money remained a chronic problem. Dylan's stories found few buyers because they tended to be obscene. One on clergymen entitled "The Holy Six" was about erections of parsons. At times he was able to bamboozle publishers into reversing the spellings of his obscenities. Two towns with seemingly Welsh names were LLareggub and LLanmadog. Read them backwards. Both appear in his *Under Milkwood*.

However unacceptable his behaviour, Dylan's genius was talked about on both sides of the Atlantic. In England he won the admiration of T S Eliot, Edith Sitwell and Margaret Taylor, wife of the historian A.J.P. Taylor; in New York of Peggy Guggenheim, James Laughlin and many reputed critics of poetry. When short of money, he would turn to his rich admirers.

In the war years between 1942-45, Dylan had regular assignments writing film scripts for B.B.C. He was the father of two children but could not resist bedding women who came his way. Amongst his favourite pastimes was to urinating on drawing room walls and defecating on carpets. It was during these years that he wrote his most popular poem, *Fern Hill*. Despite drink and debauchery, he took great pains over what he wrote. There are over 200 versions of *Fern Hill*. I quote the first two verses:

> "Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
> About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
> The night above the dingle starry,
> Time let me hail and climb
> Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
> And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns.
> And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
> Trail with daisies and barley
> Down the rivers of the windfall light
>
> And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
> About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home
> In the sun that is young once only.
> Time let me play and be
> Golden in the mercy of his means,
> And green and golden I was hunstman and herdman, the calves
> Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
> And the sabbath rang slowly,
> In the pebbles of the holy streams"

By now the B.B.C. had recognised him as "celebrity class" which included T S Eliot, Auden, C Day Lewis and E M Forster. He earned enough money to take his family for a holiday to Italy. He did not enjoy it very much—he missed English pubs, cricket and crossword puzzles. He could not stand the heat. He wrote to Margaret Taylor: "It comes round corners at you like an animal with windmill arms, perhaps echoing an old nightmare. As I enter my bedroom it stuns, thuds, throttles, spins me round by my soaking hair, lays me flat as a mat and bat-blind on my boiled and steaming bed. We keep oozing from the ice-cream counters to the chemist's. Beer is bottled God."

Dylan earned some money but never realised that he had to pay taxes on his earnings. He hadn't saved anything and when the tax demands came he had to start begging again. And he had a third child on the way. Escape came in the form of an invitation from America to lecture and read poetry. He was so desperate for money that he wrote to James Laughlin, "I wish I could sell my body to a rich widow." His behaviour scandalised Americans. At one party he made passes at Katherine Anne Porter who was about 30 years older than him and when she did not respond, lifted her to the ceiling. At a meeting, when asked what he meant by "Ballad of the Long Legged Bout", he replied, "It is a description of a gigantic fuck". Nevertheless, his readings were a great success and every meeting drew large audiences and enthusiastic applause. Women found aphrodisiac in his voice and responded to his overtures. He earned the image of a "perpetually drunk lecher". Nevertheless, he continued to write passionate love letters to his wife.

> "Caitlin. Just to write down your name like that. Caitlin. I don't have to say My Dear, My darling, My sweetheart though I do say these words, to you in myself, all day and night. Caitlin. And all the words are in that one word, Caitlin, Caitlin and I can see your blue eyes and your golden hair and your slow smile and your faraway voice. Your faraway voice is saying, now, at my ear, the words you said in your last letter, and thank you, dear, for the love you said and sent. I love you. Never forget that, for one single moment of the long, slow sad Laugharne day. Never forget it in your mazed trances... I love you. Over this continent I take your love inside me, your love goes with me up in the aeroplaned air, into all the hotel bedrooms where momentarily I open my bag".

Next to *Fern Hill*, the poem that proved most popular with American and Canadian audiences was *And Death Shall*

Have No Dominion.

"And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones
gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not,
And death shall have no dominion,

And death shall have no dominion
Under the windings of the sea
They lying long shall not die windily;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;
Split all ends up they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
No more may gulls cry at their ears
Or waves break loud on the seashores;
Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails;
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion."

Whatever he earned in America was blown up on drink and women; he returned to England with empty pockets to face piles of unpaid bills and an irate wife. Both got drunk and fought each other like wild animals. It was a curiously fierce love-hate relationship. On a short sojourn in Iran at the invitation of British Petroleum Company, Dylan was again writing to Caitlin. "All these strange, lost days I love you... Caitlin my cattle anchor."

The death of his father of cancer produced one of his most oft– quoted poems: *Do not go gentle into that good night*.

"Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Wild men, who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Dylan received another invitation to the States. This time he took his wife with him. Her presence did not prevent his having extra-marital affairs and rowing with his wife in public and making her pregnant again. It was during this visit that *Collected Poems 1934-52* was published in England and earned tributes from the congnoscenti. Cyril Conolly wrote: "At his best he is unique, for he distils an exquisite moving quality which defies analysis as supreme lyrical poetry." The Collection won the Foyles Poetry Prize.

Dylan returned to Wales to finalise the draft of *Under Milkwood*. And was back in the States to earn some money. By now he had also started taking drugs, and to his chest ailments he had added gout and impotence. Nevertheless, some women succeeded in rousing his libido. He was confined to bed for long periods. He sensed his end was near. In his hallucinations he kept calling for his mother and longing for her breasts. "After thirty-nine years, this is all I've done", were the last words he spoke. He went into a coma from which he never came out. He died in the New York Catholic Hospital on Monday, 9th November 1953.

Caitlin arrived on the scene maddened with anger at the women around her husband and his death. She smashed a crucifix, a statue of Virgin Mary and hit anyone who came near her. "I was possessed of ten thousand ravaging demons... my madness an untutored broken heart," she later admitted.

Dylan Thomas died intestate. His worldly wealth was estimated at under £100.

Twelve

Evelyn Waugh Revisited

There are not many Indian families in which the craft of letters has been handed down by a father to his sons and daughters. England, on the other hand, has produced several families whose members have achieved distinction. There were the Bronte sisters; the Huxleys (Thomas, Aldous, Julian and Elspeth); the Sitwells (Osbert, Sacheverell and Edith); the Durrell brothers, Lawrence and Gerald. Amongst distinguished writer families of England are the Waughs, sons of publisher Arthur Waugh. The elder and less known was Alec, a travel writer; the more famous was his younger brother who assumed a grandiose name befitting his self-image of a country squire—Evelyn Arthur St John Waugh (1903-66). His son, Auberon, is amongst the most widely read columnists in England today. This article on Evelyn Waugh is based on some of his best known novels and collections of essays.

During one of my earliest visits to the United States, I ran into Aldous Huxley in a grocery store in a suburb of

Hollywood. I had read a very funny story by him on the funeral customs of Americans. He had written of parlours where the dead are kept for several days for relations and friends to call, and of cemeteries for pets with provision for annual reminders of their demise: "Fifi is wagging her tail for you in heaven today." I didn't believe this was true and thought he had used his imagination to make fun of the Americans. I don't recall most of the conversation we had—Aldous was a very reticent man—but I think it was his response to my question that roused my curiosity about the American way of disposing their dead.

Then I had the chance to visit a funeral parlour. It was like a five star hotel—red carpets, chandeliers, flowers and well-dressed ushers. Along the corridor were rooms where the dead were laid out in ornate coffins, nicely made up with the generous use of cosmetics. One man, a Jewish lawyer, was sat up in an arm chair in full forensic regalia with wig and black gown. Crying and tears were regarded as bad form. You shook hands with members of the bereaved family, placed flowers on the coffin, signed the visitors' book, had a cup of coffee and took your leave. Later, when I expressed my astonishment at this bizarre pretence of cheerfulness to an English friend, he suggested I read Evelyn Waugh's novel *The Loved One*.

Till then I hadn't heard of Waugh. *The Loved One* was published in 1948 and was his sixth or seventh novel. It was a hilarious take off on the macabre theme of American funeral parlours. In the story, a mortician, preparing the dead for burial, is able to give them expressions which convey his desires for a girl working further down the mortuary line. I had never read anything of the kind in black humour. I decided to read Waugh's other novels and find out more about him.

Waugh was born in Hampstead in 1903. He was educated at Lancing School and Hertford College, Oxford. He barely got his tripos, passing with a third division. Thereafter he worked as an assistant school master, and hated his job. His first novel *Decline and Fall* is based on his experiences as a school teacher. It is juvenile and very English in its immaturity. I don't find long, hyphenated names like St John which he attached to his own middle-class effeminate Evelyn, particularly witty. *Decline and Fall* is full of them and others deliberately coined to raise a laugh. There is a Sir Alastair Digby-Vane Trumpington, a Lansden of Struthdrummond, a Lord Tangent, an Earl and Countess of Circumference, a Bobby Postmaster and a Negro named Sebastian Cholmondley (pronounced Chumley). The novel was a runaway success. I plodded through it, and by the time I came to write this article, had forgotten I had ever read it.

I ascribed this rubbing out of *Decline and Fall* from my memory to selective amnesia. I must have wanted to forget it because of the nasty remarks Evelyn made about Jews and Blacks and his assumptions of being a blue-blooded country gentleman with deep roots in England's soil. And his conversion to Catholicism – I hate converts. At the age of 25, Evelyn had married a girl with the same first name, Evelyn Gardner. They were divorced two years later. The same year he turned Roman Catholic and seven years later married Laura Herbert, a cousin of his first wife. Catholics do not practice birth control; they had six children.

In between his two marriages, Waugh wrote *Vile Bodies* and *Black Mischief* based on his travels in Africa, and *A Handful of Dust*. A year after his second marriage he published one of his best satires on the press entitled *Scoop*.

The story is based on the mix up between two men with the same surname, Boot. John Boot is a minor novelist looking for a permanent job on a paper. His main contact is a lady with high connections which include Lord Copper, owner of a widely circulated daily *The Daily Beast*. William Boot writes nature columns for this paper and lives a retired, sheltered life with a clutch of indigent cousins and aunts. When news breaks of a revolution in Ishmaelia, Lord Copper is persuaded to send Boot there as his foreign correspondent.

Instead of sending Boot, the author recommended by the society lady, the editor, by mistake, sends William Boot who knows nothing about the world. Neither he nor the editor knows where Ishmaelia is. William's despatches are based on gossip he picks up from a Hungarian tramp with whom he falls in love. They make headline news in all the papers. William returns home to be knighted at a banquet, with his salary more than doubled. He quietly disappears to his country home.

In the opening pages, Waugh exposes the ignorance that prevails in the press and the supineness of editors (in this case a man named Salter) vis-a-vis their proprietors:

"Mr Salter's side of conversation was limited to expressions of assent. When Lord Copper was right he said, "Definitely, Lord Copper"; when he was wrong, 'Up to a point'.

'Let me see, what's the name of the place I mean? Capital of Japan? Yokohama, isn't it?"

'Up to a point, Lord Copper'.

'And Hong Kong belongs to us, doesn't it?'

'Definitely, Lord Copper.'

After a time: 'Then there's this civil war in Ishmaelia.'

William comes to meet his editors for a briefing on Ishmaelia. This is how it goes:

"Well, there is one thing. You see, I don't read the papers very much. Can you tell me who is fighting who in Ishmaelia?"

"I think it's the Patriots and the Traitors."

"Yes, but which is which?"

"Oh, I don't know that. That's policy, you see. It's nothing to do with me. You should have asked Lord Copper."

"I gather it's between the Reds and the Blacks."

"Yes, but it's not quite as easy as that. You see, they are all Negroes. And the Fascists won't be called black because of their racial pride, so they are called White after the White Russians. And the Bolshevists want to be called black because of their racial pride. So when you say black you mean red, and when you mean red you say white and when the party who call themselves blacks say traitors, they mean what we call blacks, but what we mean when we say traitors. I really couldn't tell you. But from your point of view it will be quite simple. Lord Copper only wants Patriot victories and both sides call themselves Patriots, and of course, both sides will claim all the victories. But, of course, it's really a war between Russia and Germany and Italy and Japan who are all against one another on the patriotic side. I hope I make myself plain."

"Up to a point", said William, falling easily into the habit.

Waugh's Ishmaelia is obviously Liberia. It is ruled by members of the Jackson family from Alabama. Since it had nothing to offer the Europeans, it was "ruled off the map, its immunity granted". Those who had come earlier in the hope of making money ended in the stew pot.

> "Various courageous Europeans, in the seventies of the last century, came to Ishmaelia, or near it, furnished with suitable equipment of cuckoo clocks, phonographs, opera hats, draft-treaties and flags of the nations which they had been obliged to leave. They came as missionaries, ambassadors, tradesmen, prospectors, natural scientists. None returned. They were eaten, every one of them; some raw, others stewed and seasoned according to local usage and the calendar (for the better sort of Ishmaelites have been Christian for many centuries and will not publicly eat human flesh, uncooked, in Lent without special and costly dispensation from their bishop)."

Discarded by European adventurers, the Americans decided to send in an American black to manage the country.

> "A pious old darky named Mr Samuel Smiles Jackson from Alabama was put in as the first President; a choice whose wisdom seemed to be confirmed by history, for, forty years later, a Mr Rathbone Jackson held his grandfather's office in succession to his father Pankhurst, while the chief posts of the state were held by Messrs

Garnett Jackson, Mander Jackson, Huxley Jackson, his uncle and brothers, and by Mrs Athol (nee Jackson) his aunt. So strong was the love which the Republic bore the family that general elections were known as 'Jackson Nagomas' whenever and wherever they were held."

The "revolution" was in fact a falling out between members of the Jackson family while celebrating Christmas. William is told about it in his briefing in the capital Jacksonburg by the itinerant Hungarian prostitute, Katchen, who milks him of money (all added to William's expense account), and an old schoolmate working in the British consulate. Meanwhile, mediamen from distant corners of the globe head for a town said to be the scene of action. No such town exists.

Journalists with inflated opinions of their profession would do well to read this rollicking comedy. Waugh had unconcealed contempt for the press. In *The Daily Beast* sub-editors busied themselves with their humdrum task of reducing to blank nonsense the sheaves of this information which whistling urchins piled before them." He delivers his *coup de grace* when John Boot protests "I've been treated like an ass".

"Yes", said his editor sadly, "That's what we are paid for".

No sooner did the war break out than Waugh joined the Royal Marines. He had little time for writing but quite a lot of it to think about what he would write. He was in the habit of making notes, pondering over plots of his stories and the characters he would bring into them. The absence of pressure to put pen to paper every day undoubtedly helped him turn out his masterpiece *Brideshead Revisited* in 1945. Even if his other books are forgotten, this one will ensure him immortality. Several million copies of Brideshead have been sold in English and in the translations in foreign languages. *The Daily Mail* lauded it as "totally magical; this great shimmering series defies all criticism". It became one of the most popular television dramas of all times.

The story is built round the family of the Marquis of Marchmain in their country mansion, Brideshead Castle. The Marquis has deserted his family and is living with a mistress in Italy. The rest of the family, all Catholics, live in Brideshead under the watchful eye of their mother; Lady Flyte. The eldest son has finished his studies at Oxford, the second, Lord Sebastian, is a freshman. His sister Julia, is a celebrated beauty, and the youngest, Claudia, stay at home. The narrator is Charles Ryder who first befriends Sebastian at Oxford and then falls in love with Julia. Sebastian disintegrates into dypsomania. Julia marries a Canadian industrialist and member of Parliament whom she does not love. Ryder becomes a very successful architectural painter, and marries a feckless beauty while he still is in love with Julia. When Lady Flyte dies, her husband returns to Brideshead to die. Both Julia and Charles Ryder divorce their respective spouses with plans to get married. However, when the time comes, they call it off. The Brideshead set breaks up; the castle is requisitioned by the army. Ryder, now an officer, is posted to Brideshead. The novel is a nostalgic account of his past associations with the family and their mansion.

This summary does not do justice to the book which is written in flawlessly felicitous prose, with descriptions of people and places which linger in the memory for a long time. "These memories, which are my life—for we possess nothing certainly except the past—were always with me," he writes.

> "Like the pigeons of St. Mark's that were everywhere, under my feet, singly, in pairs, in little honey-voiced congregations, nodding, strutting, winking, rolling the tender feathers of their necks, perching sometimes, if I stood still, on my shoulder; until, suddenly, the noon gun boomed and in a moment, with a flutter and sweep of wings, the pavement was bare and the whole sky above dark with a tumult of fowl."

I will give you a few examples of Waugh's mastery over the pen. His description of Julia—"a face of flawless Florentine Quatrocento beauty"—and his first muted expression of desire while driving home to Brideshead at night. She asks him to light a cigarette for her. "It was the first time in my life that someone had asked this of me, and as I took the cigarette from my lips and put it in hers, I caught a thin bat's squeak of sensuality, inaudible to any but me."

Julia continued to haunt his mind. They met again on board a ship and became lovers. Next evening in the dining room "though separated by the crowd, sat alone together close enwrapped, as we had lain in each other's arms the night before." It is Julia who proposes marriage to Charles. "Marriage isn't a thing we can take when the impulse moves us. There must be a divorce—two divorces. We must make plans," she then says in a matter of-fact tone.

"Plans, divorce, war—on an evening like this?"

"Sometimes," said Julia, "I feel the past and the future pressing so hard on either side that there's no room for the present at all."

The Waughs were connoisseurs of wine. Evelyn could not help tossing in a lyrical description of wine-tasting.

> "We warmed the glass slightly at a candle, filled it a third high, swirled the wine round, nursed it in our hands, held it to the light, breathed it, sipped it, filled our mouths with it, and rolled it over the tongue, ringing it on a palate like a coin on a counter, tilted our heads back and let it trickle down the throat. Then we talked of it and nibbled Bath Oliver biscuits, and passed on to another wine; then back to the first, then on to another, until all three were in circulation and the order of glasses got confused, and we fell out over which was which, and we passed the glasses to and fro between us until there were six glasses, some of them with mixed wines in them which we had filled from the wrong bottle, till we were obliged to start again with three clean glasses each, and the bottles were empty and our praise of them wider and

more exotic.”

Waugh earned quite a reputation as a reviewer of books and an essayist. *The Guardian* rightly praised him as “a writer incapable of writing a dull line.” In the preface to a collection of his articles and reviews, Waugh wrote: “The literary world is divided into those who can write but cannot think, those who can think but cannot write, and those who can neither think nor write but employ themselves at international congresses lecturing on the predicament of the writer in modern society.” Waugh undoubtedly belonged to the unlisted category of one capable of both original thought and high readability. Here are a few examples:

On Creativity:

> “There is a great deal to be said for the Arts. For one thing they offer the only career in which commercial failure is not necessarily discreditable. Shabbiness of appearance and irregularity of life are not only forgiven the artist but expected. Art offers scope for profound and prolonged laziness, and in the event of success gives rewards quite out of proportion to industry.
>
> Of all the arts, the most to be recommended to the young beginner is literature. Painting is messy, music is noisy, and the applied arts and crafts all require a certain amount of skill. But writing is clear, quiet and can be done anywhere at any time, by anyone. All you need is some ink, a piece of paper, a pen and some vague knowledge of spelling. Even the last is not essential if you employ a competent typist.”

On Education:

> “The splendid thing about Education is that everyone wants it and, like influenza, you can give it away to anyone without losing any of it yourself.”

On Paradise:

> “I am not sure if I shall to go Heaven, but I think I shall.

Anyway, I know almost exactly what it is like... The seasons are much the same as those on the Mediterranean northern coast, except that they are variable at will. Heaven is on the sea of course, and the sandy beach slopes down suddenly into the water, which is bright blue, but not too warm or too smooth. The grass is particularly noteworthy in the landscape, being very rich and green in the hottest weather. There are no coniferous trees in heaven, but plenty of well-grown oak, ash, beech and chestnut. There are magnificent formal gardens, with pools and grottos and temples and admirable antique sculpture; the fields in summer are full of buttercups and Jersey cows. There are no mosquitoes.

Meals are elaborate and incessant; the wine magnificient and incredibly intoxicating; no one ever feels the worse for anything in heaven.

No one will write any more books once they reach Heaven, but there is an excellent library, containing all the books written uptodate, including all the lost books and the ones that the authors burned when they came back from the last publisher.

One makes a lot of new friends in Heaven; all encumbering relationships such as marriage and parenthood are instantly broken at death. Love affairs are frequent, terminable at will and mutually satisfactory. Eveyone gets rather better looking as time goes on."

On Marriage:

"There is nothing essentially 'modern' in making a mess of one's marriage, although, to hear people talk, you might suppose that there were. Unhappy marriages are as old as monogamy. The thing that is modern about them is the admission of failure and the cheerful readiness to start again.

A hundred years ago people were continually getting [illegible]ds, just as they got tired of

G.M.C.E.J
1153

their neighbours and the district in which they lived and the colour of their own hair, but they just regarded these things as inevitable and put up with them. There were plenty of other things to amuse them. Nowadays, in spite of the enormous multiplication of ostensible amusements, people seem to grow more and more interested in the one amusement that civilization and mechanization have been quite unable to change: the simple old amusement of sex."

Not everyone liked Waugh; Liberals and Left wingers had good reason to loath his ultra-conservative, racist views. Amongst the many he had to bandy words with was the Communist MP Saklatvala who lived on Brick Kiln Hill (London). Punning on the two ways Waugh's name could be pronounced *Vau or Vuff,* Saklatvala sent a clerihew to *The Daily Express:*

I've had more than enough
Of Mr Waugh or Mr Wuff.

The following day Waugh replied by telegram:

Brick Kiln Hill holds a gala
On the rare appearance in print of the
obscure name of Saklatvala.

Evelyn Waugh's subsequent works *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* and *A Little Learning* are somewhat autobiographical and deal with the fantasy world of a writer approaching senility. He died in 1966. It is more than likely that his son, Auberon, will shape into as good, if not a better, novelist and craftsman of letters.

Gandhi Memorial Colleg
SRINAGAR
Acc. No: 1153
Dated: 1993